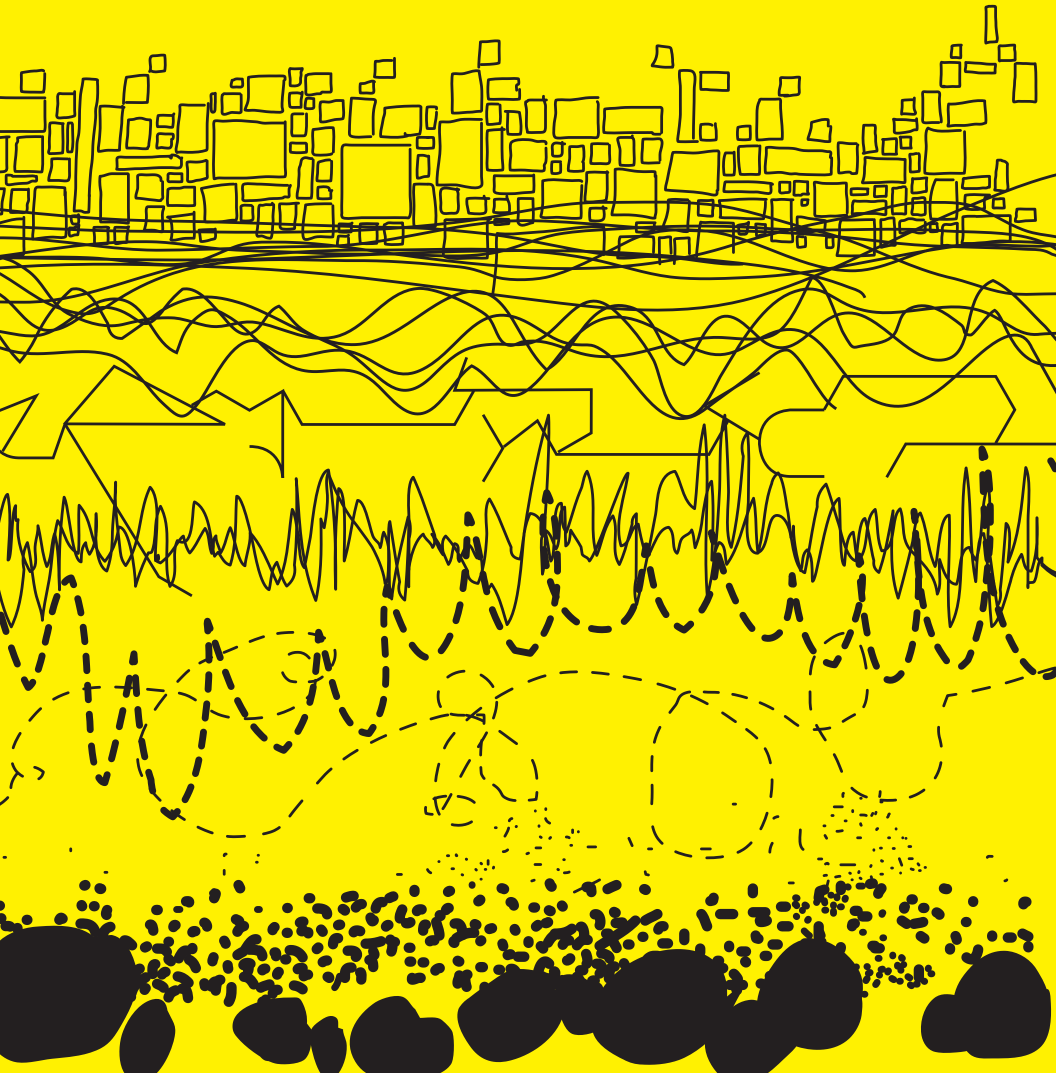
CULTURAL BLOGGERS INTERVIEWED





European cultural blogging map

As part of LabforCulture's ongoing series exploring cultural blogs across Europe, we launched an interactive map of the European cultural blogging scene. It includes the blogs from this series and other interesting cultural blogs selected by our editorial team and online community. Find out more at www.labforculture.org/culturalbloggers

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Labfor Culture .org

ISBN 978-1-906496-50-0
Interviews Annette Wolfsberger
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Editors Nicola Mullenger and Annette Wolfsberger
Contributors Mercedes Bunz; Régine Debatty; Anne Helmond; Michelle Kasprzak; Alessandro Ludovico; Marco Mancuso; Robert Misik; Marta Peirano; Alek Tarkowski and José Luis de Vicente
Production Nicola Mullenger
Language Editor Vicky Anning
Design Femke Herregraven
Publisher LabforCulture, Amsterdam 2010
POD book service OpenMute

LabforCulture is a partnership initiative of the European Cultural Foundation, and thanks the Prins BerhardCultuurfonds, BankGiro Loterij and De Lotto for their long-standing support. LabforCulture would like to thank its funders in 2009: Compagnia di San Paolo, Italy; Ministry of Culture, Spain; Fondazione Cariplo, Italy; Stiftelsen Framtidens Kultur, Sweden; Stiftelsen Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, Sweden; Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, The Netherlands; and Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, Poland.

www.labforculture.org/culturalbloggers

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EPICENTRES: WHY CULTURAL BLOGGING SHINES A LIGHT ON DIGITAL CAPITALISM TODAY

Mercedes Bunz

Have you ever been accompanied by a blog? One that you looked up again and again? One that directed your attention to events, ideas, pictures, thoughts, questions or videos you otherwise would have missed?

In today's life, blogs walk with you a certain way, just like good novels. You turn to them after a night out that didn't make you feel comfortable. At home, you stop by your favourite blog after an argument to finally enter a discussion with congenial minds.

Blogging is sharing. Bloggers share their interests, perspectives and knowledge with others. But for them, a blog is even more than that. Besides providing a platform for self-publishing, a blog regularly reminds them to focus.

When bloggers haven't written a blog post for three days, the blog makes them feel guilty. They start to look around, and often interesting things happen only because one is searching for them. A blog, like a child, gets one going. One is not alone anymore. As long as a blog is used seriously, it provides a chance to act in a structured way.

To have a duty – albeit self-imposed – is more important than ever in the digital capitalism of today. As the world was turned upside down, the meaning of do-it-yourself was re-defined from a resistant gesture to official advice.

Today, you have to invent your job instead of applying for one. You have to touchscreen through 15 different options to buy a train ticket. Or hope that you can hold on to your relationship instead of fighting a society that forces you into marriage. Today, a structure that does demand something from you is a precious thing.

In this way, blogging – and especially cultural blogging – is a perfect example of the problems that digital capitalism presents us with. On the one hand, we are no longer forced to act according to a norm. On the other hand, we refuse to take any responsibility in exchange for pretence of freedom.

Thus, cultural blogging is situated at the borders of the new digital capitalism. Normal blogs can be bigger or smaller. They can join together with other blogs to become Huffington Posts[1] later on, or disappear at the end of the Long Tail[2] with zero comments. It is only the concept of the cultural blog that makes us aware of what is going on in our society. Before, producing culture was an exception.

It still is. But its rules became a general case.

Within capitalism, the field of culture has always been a special case. It was distinct from the rest. Social critics like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer even called it an autonomous realm. While other people got jobs and had to do what they were told, working in the field of culture always meant a rather playful production. Within culture, you produce for the sake of it, regardless of success.

In this collection of interviews with cultural bloggers across Europe, we can read how the lovable we-make-money-not-art.com blog happened to turn a personal approach into an internationally known platform for electronic art, design and sympathetic obscure approaches in general. Or how the lively Dutch new media research scene is being observed and reviewed by annehelmond.nl. Or how misik.at tells you everything about cultural theory and makes you aware of quirky Austrian politics.

In Poland, you can find out how Kultura 2.0, born as a sidekick of a conference, discusses the new cultural practices related to new media. In Italy, you can focus on hacktivism, new media and sound art with Italian projects like Neural and Digicult, which combine blogging with a magazine and further approaches. You can use the vibrant Edinburgh art scene as a background to focus on contemporary art from a curating perspective, as in curating.info. Or track down the UK's creative technology arts movement, as long as no other project steals you away.

In an autonomous field, you were always your own boss and what you did was your decision. Now, these rules apply to work in general: everyone is a boss, as companies or the state don't want to take responsibility for you anymore. Now, work behaves like once only cultural production did: You will get a job, if you playfully find out exactly what is needed. Only in culture, as opposed to the general working situation, whatever you are doing, you yourself know that you are taking part in something bigger. Now, this attitude is translated to the working situation in general, but there is nothing bigger.

Precisely because of that, a cultural blog is always more than just a blog. At the moment, it is an epicentre of digital capitalism, and this might be the reason why all of these interviews with cultural bloggers focus on the blogger's revenue stream, as much as on their content. And it comes as no surprise that all blogs feature a certain amount of critique. If you run a cultural blog, you automatically comment on society. Sometimes these comments shine a light on interesting issues. Sometimes they make a living. And often they give other people a place where they belong.

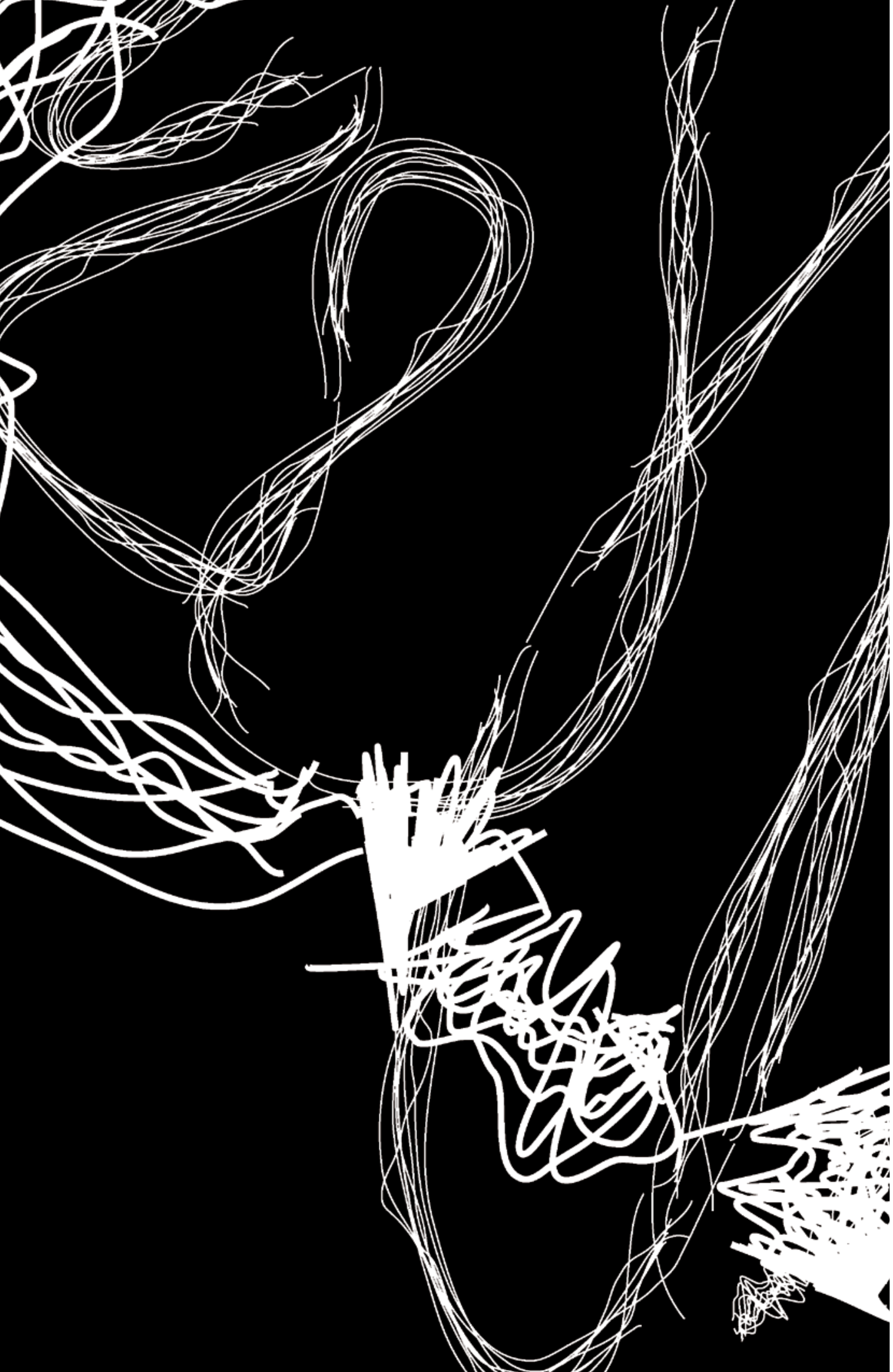
So please, read on.

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Mercedes Bunz writes about online journalism, social networks and digital media. She has a Doctorate in Philosophy and lives in London. She enjoys living with modern technology and moved from Berlin in August 2009 to join The Guardian as a media and technology reporter. She is currently writing a book about how algorithms affect knowledge and society. She also has her own blog,[3] which comments on society and its intersection with technology.

1 http://www.huffingtonpost.com
2 http://www.longtail.com
3 http://www.mercedes-bunz.de





Claire Welsby

About Claire Welsby
Claire is a professional Media Producer based in the UK. Her background is in contemporary art history and she has an MA in Cultural Policy from Goldsmiths University. Claire's specific area of interest is art, creative production and technology. Her day job is as Media Producer at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew[4] where she's developing online resources.

InterventTech.net was created in 2007 as a platform for the UK's art and technology movement. It provides a platform for showcasing and discussing work that explores contemporary life in all its technological glory – the good, the bad and the ugly.

The following interview between Claire Welsby and Annette Wolfsberger was held on 16 January 2009 via Skype chat.

Could you tell me a bit about the start of InterventTech.net? Was there a specific moment or experience that motivated you to begin?

I started www.interventtech.net about two years ago. I was winding up at loads of exhibitions/arts events and not feeling much connection to the world that I experienced on a day-to-day basis. The art I love references the world it is a part of, and provides alternative perspectives on what it means to be human – in wonderful, weird and intelligent ways.

On a practical level, InterventTech was also a fall-out project, following a year at Goldsmiths. I became interested in the ecology of the contemporary art scene in the UK, and in particular how it shaped creative activity that involved technological forms, processes and ideas. Looking back, I think this area of creative action interested me so much because I was coming round to a new understanding of the world. An understanding that acknowledges how technological development and disruption has been, and continues to be, significant in shaping the world.

It became clear to me pretty quickly that the UK was lacking an

accessible and lateral platform for art-tech. A place that embraced the range of artists exploring these territories in terms of form, creative process and subject. The kind of work being produced across media-based practice like visual and media art, performance practice, sound and sonic art, animation, gaming, computer, net and AI5 art, for example. It also became clear that the discursive networks attached to the UK's art-tech scene were driven by academic networks and hidden from public view. So unless you were explicitly involved in this community, it was difficult to experience and get inspired by work of this kind, let alone to find out what was going on and where, or to meet like-minded people. I'd say this is probably still the case – but I hope that it's less so because of InterventTech.

Your blog is quite open. At the moment it seems to be mainly you and Abs from Animate Projects blogging. Have there been more people involved on a regular basis?

No, not really – that's the project for this year. The aim is to get more people across the UK contributing to the InterventTech platform. I'm particularly keen to engage writers and reviewers based in other regions (places like Bristol, Liverpool, Nottingham, Birmingham, London, Lancaster, Brighton, Glasgow and Newcastle, for example). I'm also keen to engage new voices and specialists. Informed people with fresh perspectives on this area of creative practice. That includes artists and other people working creatively to produce stuff, but perhaps who are not tied to an academic institution. I'm also keen to engage experts in different areas. Individuals with a specific knowledge, like the history of technology(ies), globalisation, net and game art, for example. These contributors may very well come from higher education and R&D (research and development) worlds (see also the Get Involved page).[6]

That would really turn InterventTech into a platform rather than a personal blog. How much interest has there been in the past? Did people put themselves forward or is it more of an active search?

It's actually been up and down for a couple of reasons. Interest in the project and unique views go UP when Abs and I post regularly. They're also UP when we post reviews on stuff we've seen and opinion pieces about topical issues. For example, the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Arts) posts that I wrote at the tail end of last year prompted some really positive feedback from well-known/influential UK media artists (and I use that in the broadest sense). For example, Marc Garrett, Roy Ascott, Ghislaine Boddington, Fiddian Warman … all got in touch off the back of those posts:

- Original post – http://interventtech.net/2008/10/19/ekow-eschun-closes-live-and-media-arts-at-the-ica
- Comment piece – http://interventtech.net/2008/11/03/ica-gives-media-art-the-chop-under-ekow-eschun

Establishing an active user community is probably also a long-term process?

Yeah, absolutely. It takes time and you need to be consistent. It's about becoming a credible and familiar voice that people trust. Unique content and interesting voices are definitely king in the blogosphere.

Taking that ICA post and the increased feedback of readers as an example. How do and did people find out about your blog? I guess there are rather subtle marketing techniques that you employ? Did you post on lists?

Yeah – on a basic level I post articles on a blog, so anyone that subscribes to InterventTech via RSS is alerted to it. People also find the website via related queries on search engines because the subject matter is quite unique. There's not a mass of competition for this kind of content online yet :-) Other things that I do to promote the site include posting a heads up on up to five relevant community listings like JISC, Node.L and Arts Council when I update the site. I intend to do this more this year, as it's a great way to improve InterventTech's visibility among interested audiences. I publicise virally too. This mainly involves leaving InterventTech MOO cards[7] wherever I go and encouraging readers to recommend the site to people they know.

I think blogging is important if you've got something to say that isn't being said.

Regarding audience activity – I guess that really depends on issues. Do you have an idea how many people follow it via stats, and where they come from? I guess they're probably predominantly UK based?

InterventTech's core audience is UK based. A proportion of visitors are located in continental Europe and the States. In terms of statistics, InterventTech is in an interesting place at the moment. I recently closed down what was the website (which received anything between 300 to 600 unique views a week) and consolidated it with the blog on Wordpress at www.interventtech.net. As a result of the time it took to bring everything together, unique visits did drop off a little as very little new content was added in this period. I think people thought I'd given up!

Thankfully, unique visit numbers are increasing again! In January 2009, for instance, InterventTech received around 1,000 unique visits. This is because Abs and I are posting regularly again. It's much easier to keep content fresh now it's all in one place! It also makes the website stronger in terms of search engine indexing and Google reputation.

In terms of InterventTech's role in the UK 'scene', I think it's actually quite unusual. One reason is that the breadth of art and creative practice the site covers is so broad and embracing (conventional visual art practices to computer, net and game art). Another is that neither myself nor Abs feels part of any established art-tech scene or network in the UK. This is partly because we are ourselves outsiders from the perspective of established communities, but also because the media art scene in the UK is so fragmented.

An interesting area of growth in terms of InterventTech's audience is new and emerging artists and creative professionals working across digital production, interactive design, and social media, for example. These scenes (especially the latter) have picked up a real momentum in the UK in the past few years. And I think InterventTech provides a point of interest and inspiration for many people working across these fields. In that sense, InterventTech acts as a connector that sits between artists from all sorts of fields, creative producers, developers, designers,

academics and other interested audiences in the UK and the wider world.

Why are you using Wordpress rather than something like Blogger?

I'm using Wordpress because it's easy to use and the functionality it offers is better than Blogger (e.g. tag clouds, categories and in-site search). It also has a really active developer community that produces useful plug-ins to keep functionality up to date. WordPress also offers stats. Blogger doesn't offer this, in the free package anyway.

Having been in touch with quite a range of people with a cultural background in Europe, I have found it quite interesting to find out that they are very selective in which blogs they read – if they follow any at all. It seems that they rely on mailing lists more than blogs. The main argument given so far was that they regard blogs as too personally focused, therefore the content is sometimes too arbitrary.

I absolutely understand where they're coming from – but I also think that people's understanding of blogs is limited at times. Make,[8] Boing Boing,[9] We Make Money Not Art,[10] Eyebeam[11] and Rhizome[12] are all professional and popular blogs and offer a wealth of quality content for people interested in this area. Posts in these spaces are not always written from a personal perspective either.

In terms of why people might feel this way, I guess I have a couple of theories. The first is that there is often a lot of repetition across sites covering this area of creative practice. There are a lot of regurgitated press release posts because they are quick and easy to write. Alongside this there is a bias in focus towards work and artists emerging from the US and Asia. And at times there doesn't seem to be enough unique editorial produced by credible, interesting and knowledgeable voices. At InterventTech we deal with this clash by separating out what's on from personal reviews by individuals. I think this helps to present a good editorial balance – bearing in mind you can always be better and do more of this kind of stuff...

This seems to be happening not only in the UK. On many of the lists, apart from announce-lists, you find mainly regular voices. How far do you consider these to be walled gardens?

Something that really interests me about the dialogue and discursive activity happening on mailing lists is that it is often very blog-like in nature. People start a conversation by posting about something they've seen, an area of work or an issue they're interested in, and then others bring their knowledge to the table, take part in that conversation and move it along. The only difference is that the conversations aren't archived, they're not searchable and they're hidden from the wider world. This is the bit that I don't get.

You're also right in respect to the issue of voices. The conversation that takes place via announce-lists is often led and shaped by the same group of individuals. That's not to say that these voices aren't valuable, because they are. But I think it's probably quite difficult for new voices to get involved and to get heard. The language and discourse of these hidden networks is also quite inaccessible in terms of broader public engagement. This may be a non-issue for the purpose and needs of these kinds of communities, but unfortunately broader efforts to engage public audiences with this kind of work and strike a dialogue around issues are also minimal. This is a missed opportunity, I think.

I like to cover all the things I see: good-bad-ugly.

One question that I find really interesting, given your plans for expansion: What is your take on why mailing lists feel so closed – and how would you prevent your blog from becoming as closed?

I think the reason mailing lists are closed is because they're mailing lists :-). The interesting question is why the communities that drive these networks choose to keep it that way. One reason for this may be legacy – "this is how we've always done it". Another might be related to what people are comfortable and familiar with. The relationship between the way a community is designed and how it is used is an important one. When a network of people get used to a particular kind of space (i.e. a hidden network supporting close-knit peer dialogue driven by email alerts), it's difficult to change the format because the individuals involved are comfortable with the discursive architecture and rules of engagement. More open and transparent systems (like blogs) can sometimes feel scary to those who aren't familiar with them. The values that underpin blogs include openness, transparency and accessibility.

I guess it is also an issue of language/ terminology and the choice of subjects?

Yes. Accessible language and vocabulary is important when engaging wider audiences, as is an understanding of the kind of 'hooks', issues and topics that interest people. In the UK, I'd say opportunities to get art-tech work platformed in established and popular art spaces is also an issue. As is the opportunity to make impactful public art projects happen.

In order for an artist to grow, get noticed and make a living from what they do, for example, they need opportunities to platform and show their work. This means that, at certain and regular points in an artist's career, they need to be legitimised by the establishment in different ways. This happens by being included in a programme at a well-known public art venue, being talked about by critics and getting on the radar of commercial agents, who then help to promote and sell your work to collectors, curators and programme producers across the world. In the UK at least, I know it's quite hard for many artists working in the art-tech area to get their foot in the door in this way. Established art venues and exhibition spaces (public and commercial) are rarely designed to show off work of this kind. This goes for the design of the physical space, the equipment and facilities available, and the interest of curators and programmers.

The other side of this coin relates to public art projects. Because technology is wholly embedded in the world we live and move around in, it's important that audience engagement with art that deals with this terrain occurs in context, in real world and networked spaces. Some examples of interesting work produced for public spaces include:

- Graffiti Research Lab[13]
- Telectroscope[14]
- Under Scan[15]
- Emotion/bio Mapping[16]
- Britglyph[17]
- Nuage Vert[18]

Another aspect I am interested in is the one of economics: When you started in 2007 there was no funding

involved. Has that changed? Or is there any other source of income (apart from your 'regular' job) that helps you finance what you do?

The current situation is that there is still no funding – but saying that, I haven't tried. I am aiming to take a few days off the day job this spring to produce and submit a grant application to the Arts Council England. InterventTech certainly isn't going to become any more full-time for me, but I would like to be in a position to pay expert contributors to post articles and reviews about their area of interest. I would also like to devise a programme to encourage new and interesting voices to share their work, passions and interests via the InterventTech platform.

That would also increase sustainability quite a bit, and would add an inclusion aspect of supporting emerging voices/writers?

Yeah. It would also help to keep topics and discussion fresh. Plus challenge the core establishment a bit if you like. Mix things up a little :-)

Are there other blogs or platforms in the UK that you are aware of that have managed to get funding in the UK? Or would you be the first one?

Ummmm ... Run Riot,[19] which is what's on service driven by performance and music. And Article19,[20] a platform for dance artists. Though I'm not sure either of these are funded per se...

Regarding the content of InterventTech, how do you decide what to cover or not? Is it mainly based on what you find interesting (or 'good, bad and ugly'). How far do you base it on what you think your audience is interested in?

I like to cover anything I see (good-bad-ugly) and I always try to be fair about my experience of it. If the idea behind a piece of work is good but the articulation less so, then I always ask why. I think we do need to be fair to artists working across this area, as many are self-taught and rarely have the opportunity to collaborate with and/or learn from people with the right skills at the right time. It is also difficult to get funding for work of this kind in the UK because it doesn't always fit neatly into the criteria of the public funding system. As a result, the work that does end up getting made is often produced on breadcrumb budgets.

Concerning the economic model of your blog, you'll be aiming for some public funding. What is your attitude towards private sector support, i.e. would you allow banner ads etc. on your site to generate income?

At some point in the not too distant future, I'd really like to work on a business plan that considers a range of options when it comes to revenue, such as: commercial advertising; public funding for projects that otherwise wouldn't happen; commissions for events and public spaces and crowd sourcing, for example – micro donations that add up to fund a particular project. This is not as easy as it sounds though, not least because it's untried and untested. It would also require a lot of chats with clever people and thinking time.

Currently you seem to do more reporting/commenting than interviews? Plus you have an agenda. How do you source that (do people actively ask you to announce events)?

InterventTech currently offers reviews of work that Abs and I have seen and comment pieces on issues related to the sector. This is combined with information about what's on in the UK and listings of opportunities for artists. As well as getting more authors on board, the plan for the future is to do more comment pieces and interviews with interesting people, making stuff happen.

I find it really amazing that something like that does not exist within the UK... I know! Crazy.

...but a great opportunity as well!

Great opportunity! The challenge is finding the right people to ask for the cash (nicely of course) and the right people to contribute to the platform.

Regarding your focus, I guess you're concentrating on the UK because there is a lack of centralised information. Would you otherwise be interested in expanding to a wider territory?

That's a good question. My feeling is that I concentrate on the UK for a number of reasons. Because artists working in this area in the UK struggle to get a platform elsewhere. Although networked technologies are in concept global (so they enable us to connect across geographical boundaries), nuances of technology integration, uptake and use are shaped and guided by the local, (e.g. history, invention, laws, people, environment and place). This gets interesting when you start to think about what technological experience in the UK looks like, and why. The UK is where I'm based so it's where the work I can access and experience (other than net art) is located. If InterventTech goes down this route, it makes it easier to apply for public funding in the future.

I'm also fascinated by the impact of technological disruption over time.

This involves looking back to the invention of the wheel, the industrial revolution, warfare and arms races, inventions like electricity and the computer and interactions with day-to-day hardware like mobile phones, traffic lights and telecom poles. In other words, the old, the new, the now and the next – not just the networked.

On your point about expanding InterventTech to a wider territory... gosh! I'd love to think something like that could be possible. It would be great to see InterventTechs popping up around the world, providing a platform for local art-tech activity and then linking up as an international force.

Generally, how would you describe the role of blogging in the cultural sector (or new media arts sector)...? That's to say, what's the reason for doing it (for you) – is it complementary, alternative voices/values, alternative ways of reporting/writing?

I think blogging is important if you've got something new to say that isn't being said. Otherwise your voice can get lost. I think that well-designed blogs offer a great way to establish a collective voice for an otherwise fragmented scene (e.g. the whole ICA blog on InterventTech gave me confidence in that). I also think they offer a platform for new and 'other' voices to get heard, grow in confidence and gain an audience.

Saying that, being creative and making stuff is also really important. Blogs can reflect what's going on out there and help that work reach more people. But artists and creative action have to be at the core.

Are there any (culture related) blogs you would recommend?

There are a small number of blogs attached to media arts (Eyebeam;[21] WMMNA;[22] Rhizome[23])... but as I

said earlier, they often talk about the same work, artists and projects, and have a tendency to be focused on the US and Asia.

Some blogs I would recommend include Boing Boing,[24] Make,[25] Ars Technica[26] and Wired.[27] I would add Digg[28] and Current[29] – these last two are more recommendation sites.

If you could change something that you've come across in the development of your blog that did not work, what would it be?

In the case of InterventTech, setting up a website and blog in parallel was a mistake. This has been addressed now. I always feel that I do some stuff pretty badly, but the main guilt trip is wanting to do more than I can realistically achieve.

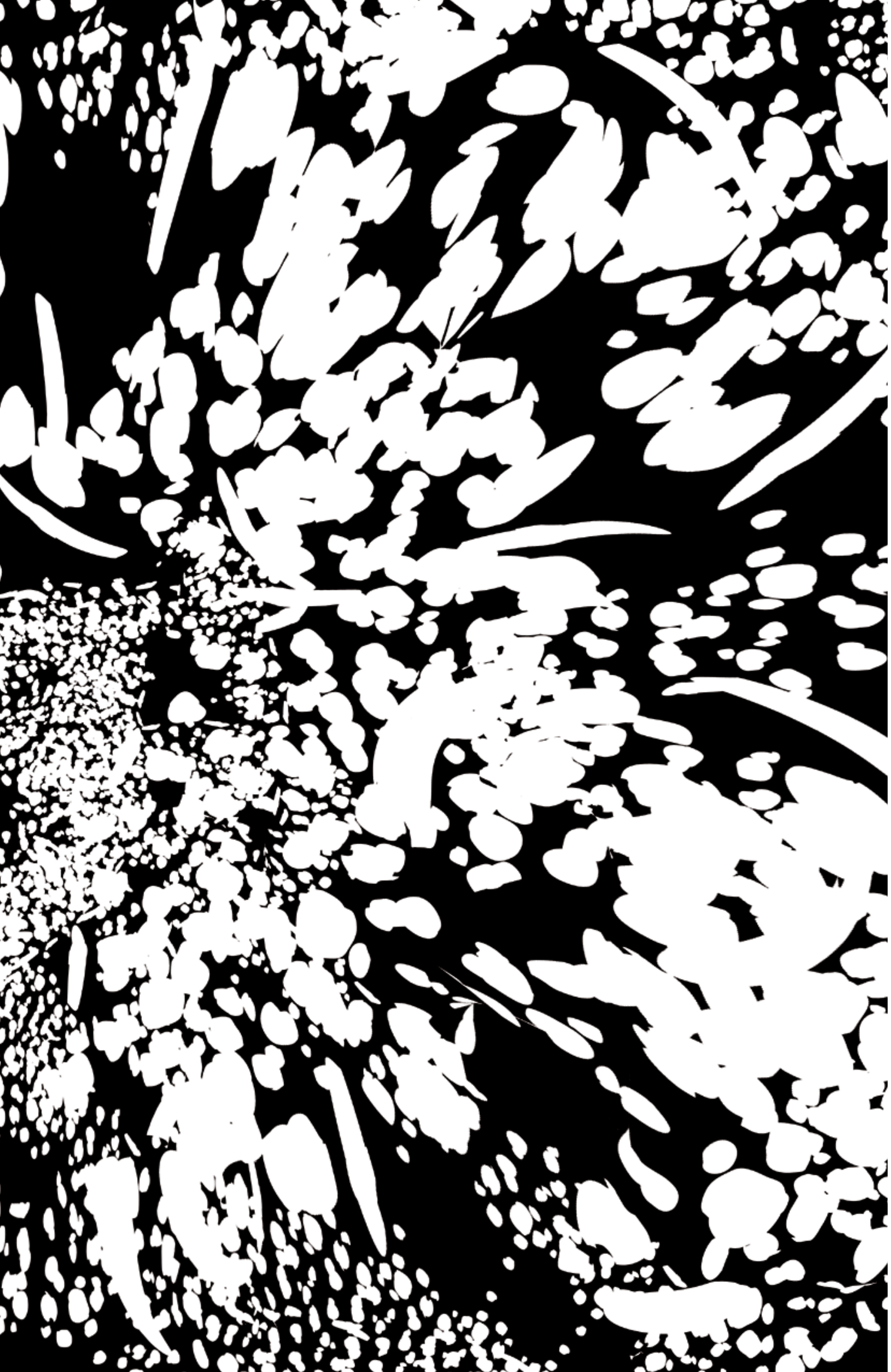
I guess not being paid for your time and resources must make it more difficult? So that blogging in a way remains a kind of hobby?

Yeah. I mean in terms of the true definition of the word, InterventTech is exactly that – a hobby. It's an unpaid activity that Abs and I contribute to in our spare time. Something I find funny about me is that I'm reasonably happy to make my contributions for free, but not at all comfortable with asking others to do the same. Regarding paying people, this is basically attached to my principle that, if you want good people to bring something to the table and get involved, you should absolutely pay for that. So over all I think it's a good principle to have in the long run.

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4 http://www.kew.org
5 Artificial Intelligence
6 http://interventtech.net/get-involved
7 http://www.moo.com
8 http://makezine.com
9 http://boingboing.net
10 http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com
11 http://eyebeam.org
12 http://www.rhizome.org
13 http://graffitiresearchlab.com
14 http://www.tiscali.co.uk/telectroscope/home.php
15 http://www.threecitiescreate.org.uk/_EMDA_Cultural_Quarters/Future_Plans/Under_Scan_in_Trafalgar_Square,_London
16 http://biomapping.net
17 http://www.britglyph.com
18 http://www.pixelache.ac/nuage-blog
19 http://www.run-riot.com
20 http://www.article19.co.uk
21 http://eyebeam.org
22 http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com
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24 http://boingboing.net
25 http://makezine.com
26 http://arstechnica.com
27 http://www.wired.com
28 http://digg.com
29 http://current.com





Michelle Kasprzak

About Michelle Kasprzak
Michelle Kasprzak[30] is a curator and writer based in Amsterdam. At the time of the interview she was a Visual Arts Officer for the Scottish Arts Council, the lead body for the funding, development and advocacy of the arts in Scotland. Michelle has received several scholarships, awards and grants for her work, and has exhibited and lectured across North America and Europe. Her curatorial projects include a combination of gallery exhibitions, video programmes and online exhibitions.

Since 2006, Michelle Kasprzak has been publishing her views on contemporary art curating on her blog, Curating.info.[31]

The following interview between Michelle Kasprzak and Annette Wolfsberger was held on 8 February 2009 via Skype chat.

I would be interested in your background and when you started blogging. Was there a specific incident or reason that led you to begin your blog?

I was trained as an artist, and gradually started to move more and more towards writing and curating to fulfill my creative aims, rather than making my own art work. After finishing my Master's in Visual and Media Art in Montreal, I really began to focus my efforts more resolutely on curating and writing.

And then you moved from curating to the funding side, at the Scottish Arts Council?

I moved to the Scottish Arts Council just under a year ago. As always, I maintain many side projects.

Is Scotland a good place for simultaneous project work?

Yes, Scotland's a great place to multi-task! There are many sources of inspiration, not the least of which is the enormously active art scene.
I mainly started the Curating.info blog because I was doing a lot of research anyway, for myself, and saving these bits of research as bookmarks on my computer or making short notes.

I thought there was no reason not to share that, open it up. I also thought by giving my research some public exposure it would enforce a bit more diligence on my part about researching regularly!

That's an interesting point… Is your blog a platform to combine your different jobs or strictly an extension of your curatorial interests?

The blog really operates outside of my jobs. The work I do from 9-5, Monday to Friday is completely separate, but when one is lucky enough to work in the cultural realm, this daily exposure to the arts cannot help but inspire.

Do you or have you ever considered collaborating with co-writers (i.e. using the blog as a platform)?

I think it's still too personal a project to do that, but I would consider it for the future. I collaborate a lot already. It's nice to have one or two things that are just my own!

Which year did you start your blog, and have there been certain phases when you look back? Have there been any changes in your blog environment that have influenced the nature of your blogging?

I started it in mid-2006, so I had been in Scotland for nearly a year – and there have definitely been phases in its development. At first it was literally a place for me to dump research links and thoughts. After a time, I started to see it more as a community resource and give it more structure, and include things like more job opportunities, because I knew that these would definitely be of general interest.

I also wanted to highlight different kinds of content, so that is why I used the Diffusion[32] e-book format to publish the interviews with curators. I thought presenting the interviews in a different way would make it stand out from the rest of the content.

Have you experienced an increase in readership/community since you've introduced the resources? And how much do you know about your audience or community – not only size-wise, but their background? And how much does it influence the format and content of your blog?

It's interesting… I don't know very much, generally speaking, about my audience, because web stats don't tell me much about them except where they are from. So from the statistics, I can definitely say I have a global readership. But in terms of demographics, that gets harder.

Would you describe them as rather active?

They are usually quite publicly passive, the blog rarely attracts comments. However, they do write in from time to time, which is quite nice! It's really lovely to get an email from someone telling me how much they appreciate the resource, or asking for advice, or letting me know that they appreciate my blog and thanks, but hey, a link is broken!

How would you describe your focus? Contemporary visual/media arts? And how do you decide what to cover (or not)?

My focus is definitely on contemporary visual art. I wanted to expand beyond my own personal expertise in media arts, to cover the widest possible range of topics in the contemporary art world. I choose not to cover many aspects that have to do with curators, for example, their roles in natural history museums and the like. Though curators have an even wider role in society, I prefer to keep the focus on the contemporary art world.

From what I've seen, it's rather international and not too UK focused – that probably also reflects your scope of work?

I try to keep it international, although I'm increasingly aware of the limits of this as I post only in English. As a simple consequence of where I live, and where I have lived, I also can't help but be more plugged into what's happening in the UK and Canada.

How do you think people (your future audience) find out about your blog? I guess there are rather subtle 'marketing' techniques that you employ? What tools do you use – such as lists etc.?

I probably owe a lot to Google! The strict focus of the blog has meant that it ranks pretty highly in Google results for searches about curating. Also I started a Facebook fan page, which I think has really helped bring in new readers. On Facebook, Curating.info has over 1,000 fans now! So I think that has encouraged traffic to the blog. I also experimented very recently with a Facebook ad, just to see what it was like. I was able to get $100 free advertising on Facebook. I have to say not many people have clicked on the link yet, but I will wait and see how it performs.

How would you describe the status that blogging has in your daily life? You finance yourself by your regular job(s) and blogging is a 'spare time activity' (though spare time is probably not a very suitable term)?

Yes, for now blogging is definitely my evening and weekend activity. I have not fully explored ways I could 'live' off the blog – I am not sure it's even possible.

How would you describe the economic model behind it? For example, your blog is currently ad-free, isn't it?

I have conducted a few very small, very un-scientific experiments. I ran Google AdWords for a short time, and was part of a more focused ad network for a short time as well. Neither approach generated any money for the blog. I still occasionally contemplate what might be the ideal arrangement. Perhaps that would be one or two aesthetically pleasing ads on my blog that generate enough money to make the whole idea of having ads at all worthwhile, and that advertise companies or institutions that I believe in!

I also wondered if you knew of any blogs in the UK (and beyond) that have received public funding…) Not that I think that that should be the only viable way of income. Or is the quality and joy of it also that it's NOT a paid-for project?

I can't think of any blogs that get public funding, though of course I can think of some organisations that have blogs, which might use some of their public funding to fuel that type of activity. I believe it's important for organisations to think about different ways to engage with their audiences, and blogs might be one good way for them to do that.

On the one hand, it would be fabulous if I could live comfortably off the blog, and I think there are other bloggers who do, but I would want to re-think the whole thing to do so.

I'd have to consider what would attract solid, consistent advertisers, or a steady stream of donations. I feel I'm part-way through an experiment I've started and so it remains ideal to keep it as a side project, and save major re-thinking for later. I can tinker with Google AdWords and if it makes me a few quid, great, but if not, I also don't depend on it.

Would you describe your blog as belonging to a certain 'scene' and if so, how would you describe it? You have quite a few links on your blog leading to other blogs. Are there any you would specifically recommend regarding other voices of cultural blogging in Europe?

That's an interesting comment, regarding the 'scene'. I think that the delivery of information from the internet via RSS feeds is so personalised for everyone, it's hard to know what a scene is! Your point about the links I have is a good one… it may be the only indication of a scene, to see what others link to!

I understand that the notion of a 'scene' is a difficult one. Was one of the main reasons for you to start your blog also because there was a lack – in your case a lack of pooled online knowledge and resources regarding curating?

The thing about the web is that there is always a 'lack' if you are willing to get drawn into ultra-specific niches. Blogging styles are also so radically different. I think I provide a certain perspective, and also differentiate between news and announcements, while also presenting my personal views, opinions, etc. So for example, some European bloggers, like Francis McKee,[33] a Glasgow-based curator, create blogs that are relatively unannotated lists of links. Others, like Régine Debatty,[34] a Berlin-based[35] writer are more editorial. Francis and Régine are very different, and I'm different again, and yet perhaps we all merrily co-exist in someone's RSS reader!

Geert Lovink in his book Zero Comments[36] (2007) states that blogging is practically non-existent in the visual arts and new media arts sector, as opposed to, for example, (popular) music. What's your take on that?

Not knowing the popular music field particularly intimately, it's hard for me to compare the two, but I can speculate on a relative lack of visual arts blogs. I think it could have to do with a certain timidity in open criticism, though the few bloggers who are openly critical are praised for it. And there is also the 'what do I get out of it?' factor, as the rewards are not always apparent. For example, Edward Winkleman[37] is widely admired for his very informative blog that is a good source of news and also helps artists and dealers understand each other, but perhaps no other art dealer has done it before him because they didn't understand what they'd get in return for that time investment. What he gets, of course, is street cred and respect… not money, but of course you can't buy respect. However, that said, it's not as cynical as that – I don't know him, but I'd be willing to bet he also simply enjoys it!

Have you had any job opportunities, offers or similar as a result of your blogging?

No job offers have come my way, but interview opportunities like this are nice! Recently I went to an artist/curator mixer event in London, and met a woman who got a job because she saw it first on my blog… which made me feel really proud and happy for her!

Another point that came up in a previous interview was that existing mailing lists were perceived as difficult to engage with (rather closed) – and blogging was a nicer (maybe safer) way of building up your own environment for opinion?

Yes, I agree. Where mailing lists can get taken over by a few inconsiderate voices, or seem really 'dead' if no one is posting any more, you can maintain a blog and have complete control – and also freshen it up with incomplete thoughts, questions, polls, even images, whereas on discursive mailing lists a new argument, thought, or act of moderation needs to happen. They're different animals.

On a more general level: What would you consider as the role of blogging in the cultural sector?

I think it's an excellent way of establishing several streams of discourse. It's not just about the art critic in the newspaper anymore – though of course that's obvious. As Clay Shirky has said: "the question today is not 'why publish' but 'why not publish?'" – and people are publishing more than ever before.

Blogging becomes part of personal branding, establishing an audience, establishing something that will be an interface to a public without an intermediary

– which is what makes it slightly dangerous, and is why people have lost their jobs over what they blog about. Our lives are still organised very hierarchically and yet blogging allows us to jump over these hierarchies, which can make people nervous. I'm lucky to have great employers and friends!

A bit 'Wild West' at times? It seems that it takes people quite a while until they grasp the full extent of the 'publicness'?

Yes, it's still Wild West in a number of ways. People are still figuring out where the 'gold' in it is and asking themselves why they are settling there! But I think it's the immediacy, the you-push-the-button of it, and the lack of intermediary that makes it attractive. It's you, typos and all.

…which is why it must be quite liberating to regard it as a non-income generating activity at times, I guess?

Yes, if I really had to try to generate money from my blog, it might not be as difficult as I imagine, but at the same time I am happy (for the moment) not to have to find out.

So going back to the beginnings of your blog… is there anything you would do differently if you could?

I think the only thing I might have done differently would be to find a way to encourage more dialogue and comments between readers. I didn't try to cultivate that, and my blog layout doesn't encourage it, either. However, that said, people seem to get value out of what I do anyway. It is fulfilling a mission and perhaps heavy user interaction is not necessary at this stage.

Are there any other culture blogs that you would recommend that I should not miss on my viral journey?

Check out the Relevant Links section on Curating.info for a few key ones!

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30 http://michelle.kasprzak.ca
31 http://curating.info
32 http://diffusion.org.uk
33 http://www.francismckee.com
34 http://www.wemakemoneynotart.com
35 Since this interview, Régine Debatty has relocated to Italy.
36 http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/weblog/2008/01/31/zero-comments
37 http://edwardwinkleman.blogspot.com





Alek Tarkowski

About Alek Tarkowski
Alek Tarkowski holds an MA and PhD in sociology from the University of Warsaw. He currently leads the Creative Commons Poland project[38] at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Mathematical and Computational Modelling (ICM) at the University of Warsaw. He is a member of the Board of Strategic Advisers to the Prime Minister of Poland. From 2006 to 2008, he wrote a daily column on new culture for the Polish public radio station, Bis. His interests include cultural and social aspects of digital technologies and the intellectual property system.

Kultura 2.0[39] is a Polish blog about new cultural practices related to new media. It is edited by Alek Tarkowski and Mirek Filiciak.

The following interview between Alek Tarkowski and Annette Wolfsberger was held on 13 April 2009 via Skype chat.

Could you describe your background? When did you start blogging and why? Did you start by yourself or as a collective (you seem to have several authors on the blog)?

My background is in sociology. I did both an MA and a PhD in it. And since about the final year of my MA studies, I've been interested in the sociology of new media and new media in general. Also, for the last four or five years, I've been actively involved in setting up and running Creative Commons in Poland, which gives me another point of view of basically the same issues – the interface between culture, society, new media and the intellectual property system.

Initially, I had a different, private blog, which I started in 2003. It was called *terminal internetyki* – which you could translate as 'the terminal of internetics', the last word being a word game of sorts. We had plans to collaborate more closely on the subject of 'sociology of the internet' with a group of other PhD students. We planned to have a group blog, but in the end only I had the energy to write it. So I wrote it, irregularly, until the end of 2005, with varying energy and patience, mainly as a

personal thing. I don't feel it was read too much or had any greater significance.

Regarding the current blog, at the end of 2006 I was invited to co-organise a conference on culture and new media, which we called 'Culture 2.0', in relation to the term 'Web 2.0'. It was organised by the Polish Audiovisual Publisher (PWA),[40] a state-funded institution responsible for producing audiovisual content, mainly of the high art sort. Through the conference and a subsequent report, PWA was interested in exploring new issues in the field, such as the influence of new media, digital archiving, digital popular culture, copyright-related issues, etc.

So that was a starting point for the blog I guess?

The conference team was led by Edwin Bendyk, who is a journalist with a major Polish weekly called Polityka,[41] which at that time was starting a batch of blogs on its website. So Edwin created the Kultura 2.0 blog as a blog about 'new digital culture', at the weekly's site.

So it started within a kind of 'institutional' website!

We started writing in September 2006 – the conference took place in December 2006. We've been writing since then, but Edwin already had his own blog on the site. At some point he stopped writing at Kultura 2.0 and another person also dropped out, leaving me and my friend Mirek Filiciak, a media and film scholar, as authors.

Would you still consider Kultura 2.0 to be more of a platform than a personal blog?

Well, the blog wasn't really an institutional site for the conference or PWA. Or course we wrote about the conference, but the idea was to write first of all about related issues, using the blog as a venue for promoting certain issues that are not well developed in the Polish public debate.

Also, it was personal from the start, in the sense that the voice was personal. We were not writing as employees of PWA, or Polityka, for that matter. The common thing was the name and the subject matter. The blog fits into a 'network' of organisations and events, centred around us – its organisers. Furthermore – this is important, I think – Polityka has never in any way tried to influence our blog, which is very comfortable for us.

Have you considered getting more people/writers on board or are you happy with the way it is now? And is your blog still part of Polityka or has that changed?

The blog is still based at the weekly's site, and current blog posts are visible on the main site of the weekly – unless they get bumped by more current posts by someone else. Regarding more people – we haven't really considered it. More precisely, we have talked with good friends several times who we thought might be a good addition. But our experience is that, in the end, most people are not able to do it. They seem to lack commitment or ideas. We've had a 'guest post' maybe five times and that's it!

How do you manage your time between the blog and your actual job?

These are basically separate. I work at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Mathematical and Computational Modelling (sounds scary, I know), where I run the Creative Commons Poland project. I am also involved in other activities related to Open Access, and what we call Open Science in general. So my work does not involve this cultural aspect – but

on the other hand, culture is an important field for Creative Commons. And it is also something that interests me. For instance, in 2005-2006 I had a short daily radio slot for three minutes called 'the other side of culture', which was basically about the same things as the blog.

Because of these interconnections and my personal interest, I've been writing the blog, and we've also been running the Culture 2.0 project as this on-and-off initiative. We partially organised one more conference with PWA, did a summer workshop with a different institution, and then in the academic year 2007-2008, we did a series of monthly meetings on the subject, again with PWA. So writing the blog helps me feel that I'm dealing with these cultural issues that I'm interested in. I also consider it a way of indirectly promoting Creative Commons (and related subjects) to a broader audience.

How would you describe the focus of your blog? How do you decide what to cover and what not? And, for those who don't read Polish, what do most of your posts contain (reviews, announcements, interviews…)?

The blog is called 'Culture 2.0. Future's Digital Dimension'. The subject range was initially determined by a) the conference and report scope and b) our interests. The four main areas defined for the conference were: Future, Convergence, Heritage, Creativity and Participation. But I think that we haven't stuck closely to these subjects and have been writing about the things that interest us. Mirek is the one interested in games, movies and film industry, media education; I write more often about copyright, free culture, and so on. And some issues interest us both: participatory culture, new models of cultural production and distribution, transformation of media industries, or research on new media.

I think that our posts usually have one of the two formats: either they are a short summary and a discussion of a link that we found interesting and worth sharing (but we seem to always try to write something more than just a summary), or it's more of a short essay, putting together several sources into a narrative. We usually write about current links/events/news and very rarely create long, subject-based posts that serve as 'compendia' on some subjects. I would say that the blog is more like a public notebook. We've had several interviews, but not more than probably five, and similarly only several book reviews.

We also publish announcements for different events, in particular ones that we are involved in. When the series of monthly Culture 2.0 meetings was running, we published announcements and afterwards descriptions of meetings, as documented by the colourful icons on the right-hand side of the blog. And as you can see, we don't write too often, not more than ten, maybe at most 15 entries by one of us, sometimes less, in a month. The blog is clearly a side effort for both of us…

I guess that most of your audience or community comes via Polityka? Are there any other tools you use to attract and alert your potential new audience to your blog?

Regarding readers – when we look at statistics, about 10% of people return to the blog. We assume that this smaller group is our core group, who are interested in the subject; taking into account the small size of the community interested in these issues, we might know each other personally, or at least know them from their online writing. The larger group are the 'random readers', coming from links at Polityka's main page, or from searches. Personally, I have a bit of a problem when I write – whether I can write for

the core, as 'expertly' as I want – or whether I should explain things again and again for the random group. We mention our blog at meetings or presentations we give, but otherwise do not promote it. I do not know of a mailing list devoted to new media and culture, comparable to say Nettime.[42]

I think there is a strong community, also an online one, interested in new media from the artistic point of view. It is tied to art galleries, museums, publications, etc. — but we are not part of this community.

This already links to my next question – I was wondering if your blog belonged to a certain 'scene'!

Well, I think that it belongs to a certain scene by virtue that the authors belong to a certain scene: of people interested in the transformation of cultural production, distribution, consumption and participation because of new media (or related issues, like copyright for instance). But this is a small scene, and people come from different backgrounds. Some are interested more in technology, some more in law... it's a small scene, and lacks visible personalities, in the sense that someone really famous in Polish cultural circles is interested in these issues. Or if they are interested (for instance academic anthropologists), they do not blog. In general, researchers in Poland do not blog.

With what you mention above, engaging different groups of readers – have you had comments about the accessibility of your posts? Or are you trying to find a balance based on feeling?

No, we do not have any such comments. And commenting is in general rather weak on our blog. I'd say at most once a month a post stirs up a decent discussion. And 80%, maybe even 90% of commenters repeat themselves and these are people we somehow know, online or offline.

So it sounds like there is still a lot to develop and your blog definitely responded to a lack of critical writing in that field?

As for responding to a lack, yes, I'd say the blog is an easy and flexible way to write about things that don't get written about by 'major media' – so for me it is a way of introducing issues into the debate on culture in Poland.

Geert Lovink in his book Zero Comments[43] (2007) states that blogging is relatively underrepresented in the new media arts sector (or visual arts), as opposed to, for example, (popular) music. What's your take on that?

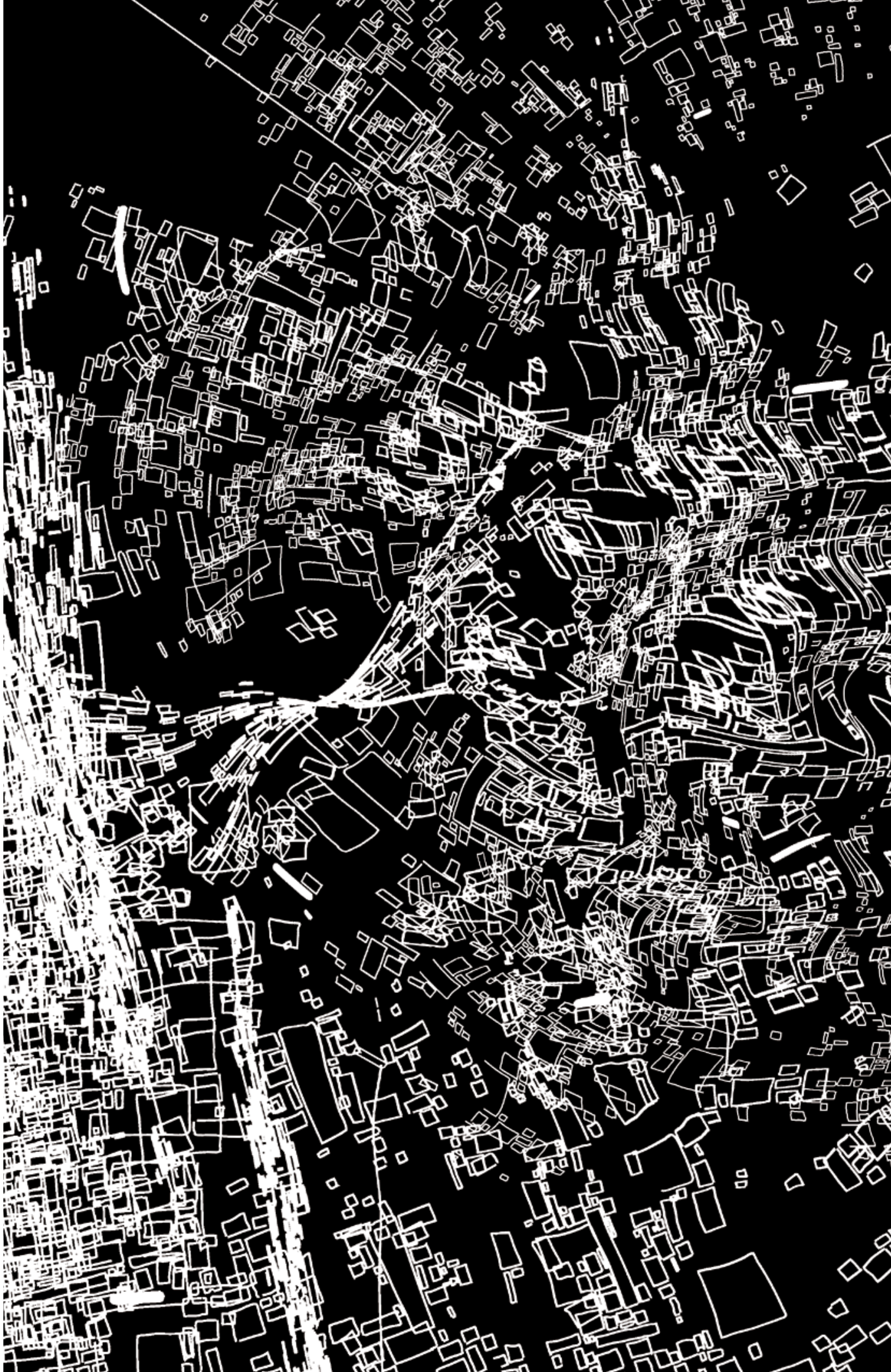
I don't have a good scientific overview of blogging in Poland, but my intuition would be that there might actually be more art blogs – not necessarily new media art blogs, but 'new art' blogs – or what you might call visual arts, than music blogs. It's difficult to compare, but the difference is that professionals from the art scene do write – it seems to me – more often than professionals

in the music business. Though again, I know a couple of music critics who do write blogs, so I guess I'm unable to give you a good response on this one. In general, good blogging, by semi-professional or professional writers, on cultural issues, is rare in Poland – but you can always find at least several good titles, which I guess might be enough.

I keep track of the blogs that I feel are related to my interests and I rarely read something original worth writing about. People mainly seem to do what I do, link to or comment on texts/events from abroad. And if there is discussion, it is almost always in the comments, and not between blogs. In this way Polish blogging seems limited – it rarely produces original ideas that resonate broadly.

Blogging seems more like ephemeral note taking, commenting on current events.

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38 http://creativecommons.pl
39 http://kultura20.blog.polityka.pl
40 http://pwa.gov.pl
41 http://www.polityka.pl
42 http://www.nettime.org
43 http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/weblog/2008/01/31/zero-comments





Marco Mancuso

About Marco Mancuso
Marco Mancuso is an Italian-based critic, art curator and journalist who specialises in digital art and culture. Founder and director of Digicult,[44] Marco works specifically on contemporary audiovisual art and design, with a focus on electronic music and visual art, software culture, generative art and design, open source technologies, as well as interactive and ambient space installations. He curates exhibitions and events, and teaches at NABA (Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti) and IED (Istituto Europeo di Design) in Milan.

Digicult is a cultural project and platform focusing on promoting and disseminating digital art and culture, on the impact of new technology and science on art, design and contemporary society digital culture and electronic arts.

The following interview between Annette Wolfsberger and Marco Mancuso took place via email in March 2009.

How would you describe Digicult?

Digicult is a critical and journalistic multiple online project, focused on the promotion and dissemination of digital art and culture, on the impact of new technology and science on art, design and contemporary society.
It is based on the active participation of 40 professional contributors, who represent the first Italian-wide network of journalists, curators, artists and critics in the field of new media art and culture. This network was created originally by me as founder, promoter and director of the project, but it has been growing in the past four years. Digicult today is a web portal updated daily with news, calls for artists, events and project highlights, links, Web 2.0 tools, RSS feeds and more.

What do you cover within Digicult? And how do decide what to cover or not?

Digicult is also the editor of the monthly magazine DigiMag,[45] which discusses net art, hacktivism, video art, electronica, audio video, interaction design, artificial intelligence, new media, software art, performing art with a critical and journalistic approach. Digicult produces an electronic music and audiovisual podcast, DigiPod,[46]



and also has its own newsletter international service called DigiNews. Digicult is also involved with the art agency DigiMade[47] in activities like media partnerships and special journalistic/critical reports of important festivals, special projects and curatorial events in Italy and worldwide. We also work as curator/promoter of some Italian artists presenting their work at festivals, events, platforms and cultural centres in Europe and worldwide, within digital art and new media culture.

This sounds like DIGI-EMPIRE! And it sounds like you are covering a lot. What are your specific areas of interest?

Generally Digicult is interested in all art forms that involve the use and misuse of digital technologies, the mix between analogue and electronic instruments, the impact of scientific phenomena and studies on visual and sonic aesthetics. As a critic and curator, I'm very focused on contemporary audiovisual art and design: in other words, on those crossing borders between art and design forms concerning the immersive and sensorial relationship between vision and sound, moving from experimental cinema to video, from live media to live cinema, from graphic animation to generative art, from electronic music to audiovisual installations, from audiovisual interaction design to hyper architecture.

Is your focus Italian or international?

From the very beginning, Digicult was written in Italian and English. I collect the news for Digicult in English and directly translate it into Italian. Also DigiMag is always translated from Italian to English. My idea was twofold: on the one hand, to promote Italian critical culture worldwide using the Net, to shine the light on a new Italian generation of critics, artists, curators and journalists; and on the other hand, to include an international attitude and work with other realities worldwide, to create a monthly magazine for an international audience, following events, making interviews, creating networks and spreading culture.

How much do you know about your community? And how far does that knowledge influence what you're publishing?

Honestly, although I follow the Digicult demographic data and visits with a counter, I'm not addicted to statistics. So, I'm not an expert on the Digicult community in terms of age, country of origin, and so on: this always seemed to me like a sort of marketing tool that does not fit with my attitude towards networking and the internet. At the same time, I get strong daily feedback from the Digicult community, so I can tell you that Digicult is mainly for people addicted to or interested in digital art and culture: students, artists, critics, promoters. Many of them are new to the world of digital art. They are curious and want to know as much as possible, and they also want to learn about the possible business opportunities within the field. Many others are like us, they know this world very well, and look for a more critical approach to digital art and design and culture.

You just referred to marketing tools. Do you have an explicit marketing strategy? Which tools do you use to inform people about the existence of your blog?

I have always tried to develop a sort of marketing strategy for Digicult. Who doesn't do it? Especially if you open a generalist/information/critical blog or website. You want and need to reach a larger amount of people. Of course, I'm not a marketing strategist, so my only weapons were and always will be our professionalism

and knowledge of internet dynamics and communities. On the one hand, I think that people found and find out about Digicult through word-of-mouth: someone who tells a friend or colleague about us, or links on other sites, or references. Or they might be surfing on the internet, searching for something like Digicult and a magazine like DigiMag.

On the other hand, when I started Digicult, I also worked on some 'marketing' strategies. First of all, I started to work with some mailing lists like Rhizome,[48] Spectre[49], Syndicate,[50] Nettime,[51] NetBehaviours,[52] Aha,[53] etc… which represent the worldwide community of people interested and focused on digital art and culture. Secondly, I worked hard with my programmer on ranking and Googling of Digicult and DigiMag pages. And thirdly, in the last year, I pushed strongly towards implementing Web 2.0 tools like RSS feeds, tags, social networks (Facebook,[54] Vimeo,[55] Flickr[56]) and microblogging.

Are your readers, or is your community, actively contributing to your blog?

Over the years, I have realised that Digicult and DigiMag are perceived more as informative and critical platforms, tools and magazines rather than pure blogs. I do not speak directly about myself. I don't give direct impressions or comments about the content. I don't speak about what I like or don't like. Digicult and DigiMag are not perceived as open platforms, but as cultural and journalistic tools. So when people arrive on the websites and take the information and inputs they need, they might comment a bit, and they are active in discussing items in various degrees. At the same time, our community is very active in a more 'private' way: they write to me, they speak with me, they suggest items or put themselves forward to contribute to the magazine, by email or by using social networking tools.

How difficult is it to build up a kind of blogging community in your view?

I think it's very, very difficult today to establish an active community, especially for cultural projects like Digicult, which are not perceived as 'pure' blogs: and I do agree that Digicult is not properly a pure blog, but something far more complex and articulated.

How have you dealt with languages?

Digicult is both in Italian and English. Digicult was created as a platform to spread information and news through the web portal and the newsletter service DigiNews and to report critically about new media art issues through the online magazine DigiMag. For this reason, and also because it is an Italian project, I always considered it to be important to first write in our native language. This is the reason why the homepage is in Italian. At the same time, I always thought that it was important to translate everything into English, as the international language understood by a wider audience. But I have to point out that it was and is very, very difficult to find good translators to translate into English, especially because Digicult is not supported by a publisher or cultural institution, so we do not receive any money for our activities, for writers and translators.

Do you think there are far less blogs about media/visual arts compared to, for example, blogs for popular music or film?

It's not that there are no blogs about new media art or visual arts. A blog like We Make Money Not Art[57] is a perfect example. There are various specific examples of media/visual arts blogs that cover specific interests. Let's think about all the blogs

that have grown out of the Generator X,[58] Marius Watz's group of blogs about generative art forms, which are focused on visual and graphic issues, or think about some other blogs about audiovisuals, experimental cinematic art forms, or some others about visualisation of complex data, like Visual Complexity[59] by Manuel Lima, for example. Other examples are Pixelsumo,[60] the blog of Chris O'Shea; workshop.evolutionzone.com[61] by Marius Watz; and Information Aesthetics[62] by Andrew Vande Moere.

Of course, many other online resources related to visual arts and new media arts are not proper blogs, but are something hybrid, like a mix of blogs and journalistic platforms. And they are made by a small group of people, academics, researchers, art critics, speaking about 'new' forms of art and culture for an elite; critics, curators, journalists, intellectuals and art lovers, open-minded people or tech addicts. In other words: a small community. A community, of course, that is growing bigger and bigger, as you can observe every year if you join the main festivals/happenings like Transmediale[63] or Ars Electronica.[64] So we cannot consider new media art as something popular, like a 'pop' form of art, even if it's becoming more and more popular.

Less popular at least than music… How can we compare that to music?

Come on, music is one the most popular forms of art and expression that we know: there are so many different kinds of music; music is everywhere and everyone listens to music. In other words, there are thousands of people who speak about music on their blogs, share their music, their opinions, buy and sell music through web platforms. And their potential audience is enormous, much bigger than the audience following new media art or visual arts.

How is Digicult financed? Do you receive any funding? Do you finance it via other channels, or is it financially self-sustainable?

I've never had – and still do not have a proper 'economic model'. I started non-commercially and I'm not commercial now. I am operating more on a cultural activist approach, also because of my experience and my background. Last year, I considered becoming a little bit commercial to survive, accepting advertising, for example, rather than dying, because at the moment the amount of work on Digicult is impossible and totally out of proportion for only one person.

So, I'm a volunteer, but of course I'm more professional than many other people who are paid for what they do. I stopped thinking that professionalism is only when you're being paid for the job. And what should I say about the people belonging to the Digicult Network, who write for the magazine? Of course I cannot pay them, so they are volunteers, but they are the best professionals I've ever worked with.

About funding: it is a sad story. As I told you, there was not one cultural institution or editor in Italy that seemed to be interested in helping Digicult, in giving a small amount of funding to pay the authors, or translators, or in sharing sources or initiatives, or giving a space to develop projects or relationships, or organise events, workshops or meetings. In other words: no funding to remain alive and work. I'm now working on the bureaucratic side of things to turn Digicult into a cultural association, because that's the only way to be able to apply for European Community or Italian state funding for culture.

What do you consider is the role of blogging in the cultural sector? Is it complementary or an alternative to print-publishing, and a (rather) new way of dissemination? In other words, why do you blog?

What a good question! It's not so easy to answer. I opened Digicult on the web, so I became a blogger – or a web editor if you prefer – mainly for two reasons: first of all because of the big potential of the web to be democratic and perfectly suited to spread culture and to reach a wide range and number of people worldwide. Secondly, because of the financial implications: the internet is the only democratic and economic place in which you can open a blog or a journalistic/critical platform and magazine and remain independent!!! I run Digicult on something like 50 Euros per year and everything is on my hard disk and on a web server. The only expenses are my energy, my time, my knowledge, and the expertise of people belonging to the Digicult Network, of course.

I consider blogging or web journalism and critique the present and the future of critical and independent information: it is today, and will be in the future, one of the most important voices in the cultural sector.

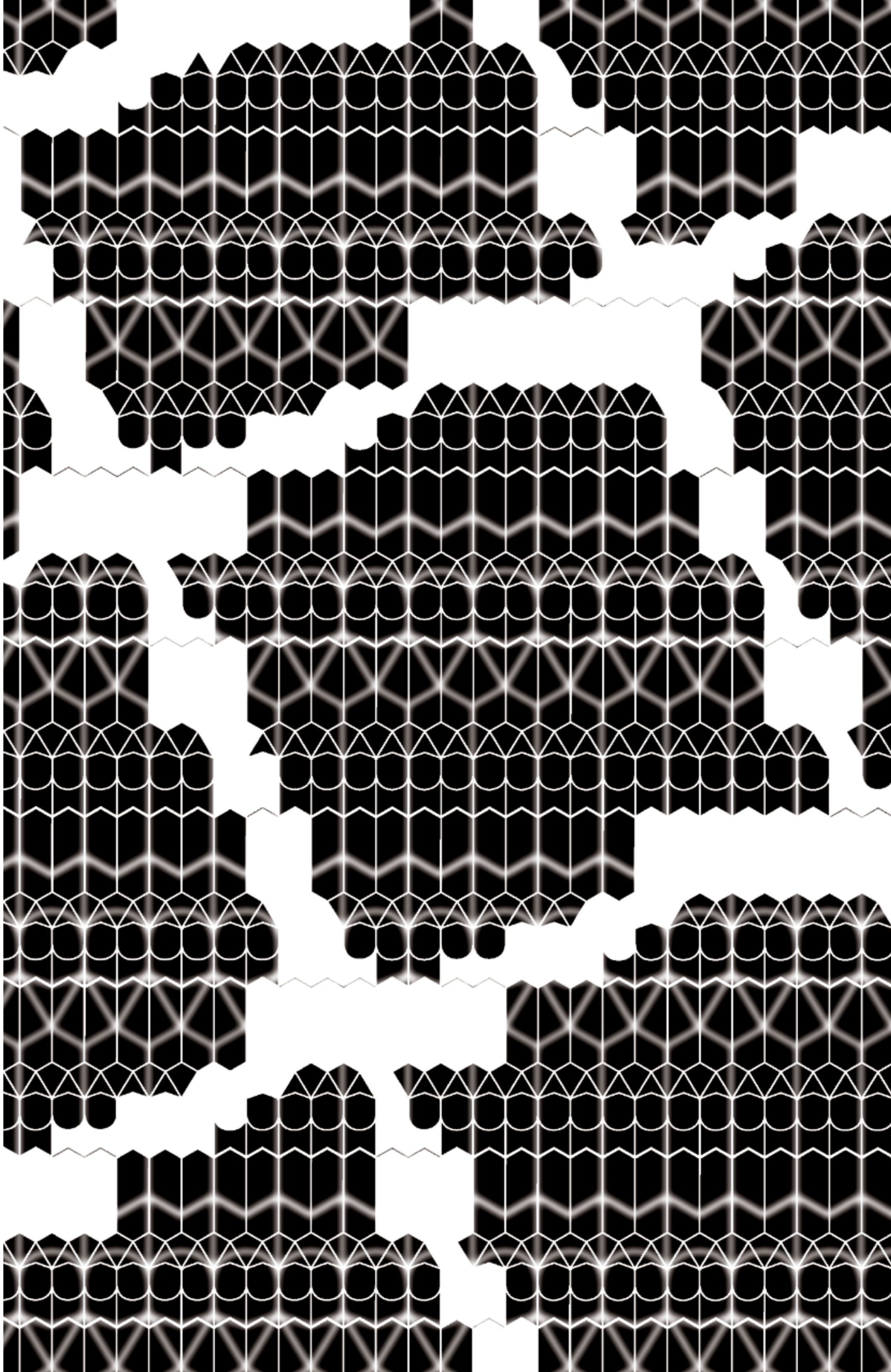
Not only in new media art and culture, of course! I do not agree with people who consider blogging as a lower form of journalism, critique and information, compared to big editorial, cultural and entertainment groups: first of all, because blogs will always be an alternative form of culture and information, really free from economic or political links (and you have these kinds of links also in arts and culture). Secondly because a larger group of freelancers, independent journalists, independent critics, independent professionals will shift their activities to the internet, understanding its potential of networking, sharing, following, reporting, and being independent, answering only to their creativity, instinct and community.

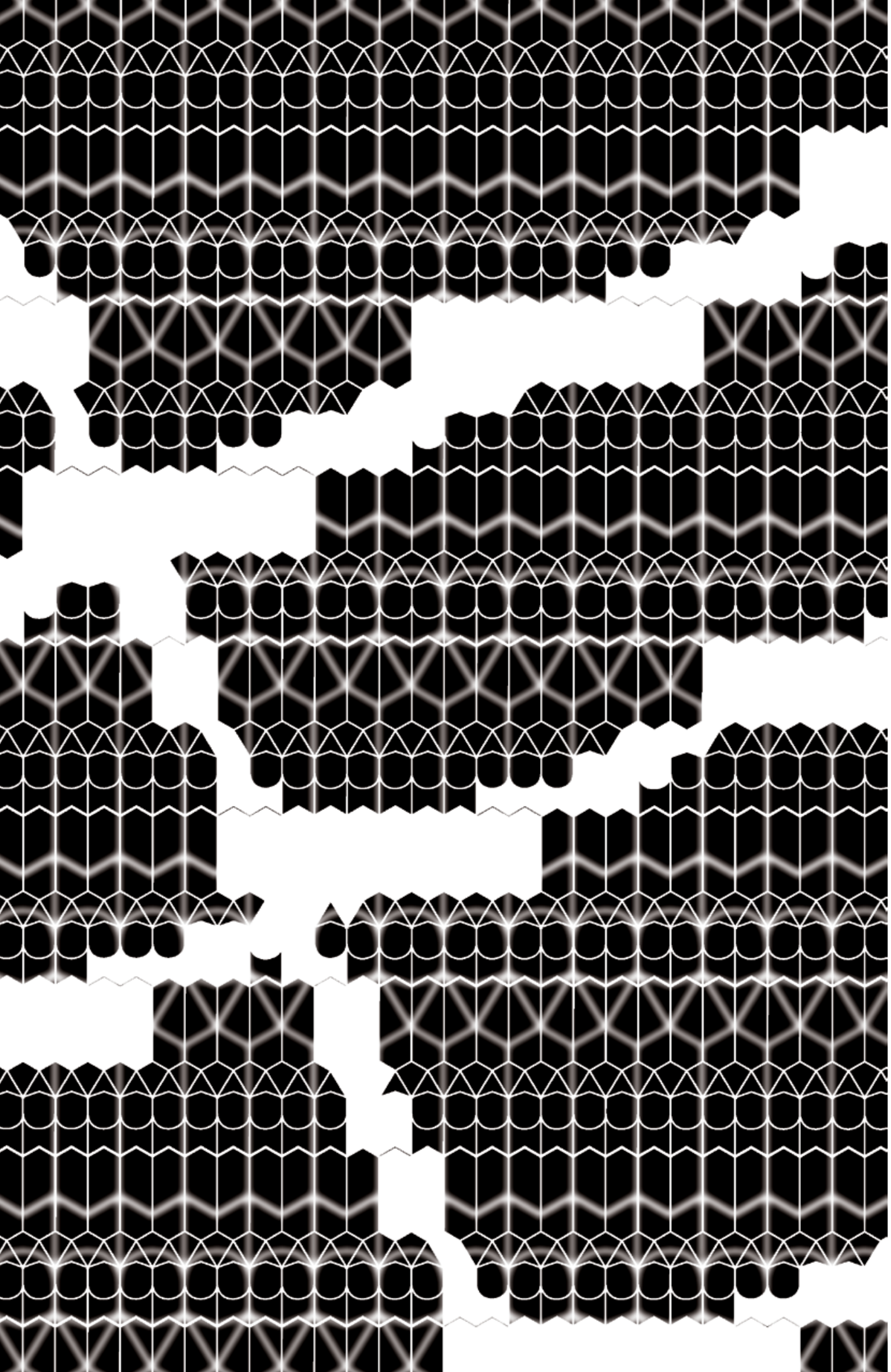
How would you describe your blogging environment? Is it competitive? Lively? Are you a sole voice?

Fortunately I'm not alone and I'm not a sole voice at all. In Italy we have a great tradition of blogging around new media art and culture: think about seminal projects like Neural,[65] Aha,[66] Random, Noema,[67] Hacker Art[68] and many other platforms and communities.

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44 http://www.digicult.it
45 http://www.digicult.it/digimag
46 http://www.digicult.it/podcast
47 http://www.digicult.it/Agency
48 http://www.rhizome.org
49 http://coredump.buug.de/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/spectre
50 http://syndicate.anart.no/subpages/mailinglist.html
51 http://www.nettime.org
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58 http://www.generatorx.no
59 http://www.visualcomplexity.com/vc
60 http://www.pixelsumo.com
61 http://workshop.evolutionzone.com
62 http://www.infosthetics.com
63 http://www.transmediale.de
64 http://www.aec.at/index_de.php
65 http://www.neural.it
66 http://www.a-ha.it
67 http://www.noemalab.org/index2.php
68 http://www.hackerart.org





Anne Helmond

About Anne Helmond
Anne Helmond is a New Media Lecturer in the Media Studies Department at the University of Amsterdam, where she studied new media from 2004-2008. She graduated *cum laude* with a thesis on 'Blogging for Engines – Blogs under the Influence of Software-Engine Relations'. From 1999-2003, Anne studied at the Utrecht School of Arts, where she received a Bachelor's Degree in Interaction Design and a Master's Degree in Interactive Multimedia.

Her personal blog[69] is about new media research and software issues. Anne previously blogged for the Blog Herald[70] and still occasionally writes for the Masters of Media (MoM) blog[71] and the Next Web blog.[72]

The following interview between Anne Helmond and Annette Wolfsberger was held on 20 April 2009 via Skype chat.

How would you describe your new media research blog? And what prompted your interest in blogging?
I use my research blog for different purposes:

- As a research repository;
- To document timely research findings (see this post[73] for instance);
- To document and share lectures I've done.

I started my research blog as a master's student at the University of Amsterdam, through a course led by Geert Lovink. We had to blog our weekly assignments at the Masters of Media (MoM) blog, which I initially started with my fellow students. I previously didn't have any experience with blogging or blog software, but running my own blog for a few weeks led me to take on the technical development of the MoM blog. It eventually turned into my research focus.

So you developed the Masters of Media (MoM) blog?
Yes, this is the third year of the MoM blog and I was initially technically responsible for setting it up. I also

acted as a coordinator. When I graduated, I handed over the design and coordination to the next masters (Erik Borra), but we stayed in close contact about the development. This third year I am not involved anymore. The blog is now living its own life and is being maintained by the New Media Masters at the University of Amsterdam.

Could you tell a bit more about the development of MoM? I think it is a very interesting model and I've not heard about anything else similar?

You mean as a group research blog?

Yes, and if I understand well, the development/coordination of MoM is also part of the students' curriculum?

Yes, it's part of the MA curriculum. Now that the platform has been established its main focus is the content. Esther Weltevrede and I also led a third year BA course called 'Digital Practices', which led to the development of the Metareporter blog,[74] a group blog by BA students. The Metareporter serves several purposes:

- It is an archive of what (old) media are writing about 'new' media. We archived all the major Dutch newspapers, including regional newspapers, magazines and a few news websites. All database entries were labelled with the source, place where the article appeared in the paper and tagged with content tags.
- It is an analytical tool to do research on this valuable archive. For example, you can click on a tag and see which newspaper wrote about this topic. It allows you to notice trends in topics for different newspapers and which topics are popular at different times and in different sections of the newspaper.
- It contains lengthy blog posts, with reflections by students on what the newspapers write about new media.

I read on your blog that you also participated earlier this year in an event regarding blog art.[75]

Yes, it was a gathering of Flat Station, a group of artists in the Bijlmer (South East Amsterdam).[76] It was not so much about blog art as it was about the changing role of blogs. What I am most interested in are experiments with the form/technique of the blog:

- JODI[77] experiments with the software and makes visible what is usually hidden from the user;
- We Feel Fine[78] by Jonathan Harris is about data-mining the blogosphere and using this data to say something about our culture. The current project I Want You to Want Me[79] by Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar explores the world of online dating;
- One art experiment I recently came across I particularly like is the Social Media Publicity Plant,[80] which thrives on online attention.

Following on from the blog art question, within your research, have you come across blogs you would define as culture blogs?

I don't know what I would define as culture blogs. I tend not to categorise blogs by genre. What is your definition of a culture blog?

Well, a rather simple one for this purpose: blogs with contemporary and popular culture as a main focus. In this case, I am looking into wider Europe, and into individual rather than institutional blogs. If you do not classify blogs by genre, how do you classify blogs at all? Or don't you? If yes, which parameters do you use?

I must admit that I mostly read American blogs/research blogs and

popular tech blogs and design blogs. (Most research blogs I follow through my RSS reader are American. It is because my research field is mainly located there.)

Is that also because the American blogging scene is more vibrant/more relevant to your interests than the European one (if you can talk about a European scene at all)?

Yes. But the interesting thing is that I am hardly connected to the Dutch blogging scene through reading/writing/commenting on their blogs. However, I do follow/converse with most of them on Twitter. I think a lot of the commenting/conversation has moved away from blogging to other related platforms such as Twitter and FriendFeed.

That would have been my next question…

Twitter is not the end of blogs, on the contrary, they supplement them. I try to incorporate all the other platforms I use into my blog such as Flickr, Twitter, Vimeo and Slideshare.

It seems that the Netherlands has one of the most active Twitter scenes. Is that true?

I don't have any activity numbers, but the Dutch Twitter scene seems really active indeed. I am connected to different new media scenes through Twitter: research, entrepreneurs, photographers, developers, etc. The Dutch Twitter scene seems to be actively using Twitter as a new communication platform, supplementing, or replacing, instant messaging and email.

How do you manage to integrate Twitter into your blog?

I used to display my five latest tweets in my blog. However, I now have a locked Twitter account because Google indexes every single tweet, which I don't like. I do want Google to index all my blog posts because I sit down to write them, think them over etc.

Note from the Editors – this update came in from Anne: After this interview, I switched to an open account with mixed feelings. The problem with a locked account is that you cannot join a conversation with someone who is not following you. Your reply to their message will not appear in their timeline.

I chose to let Google index my tweets in return for a more open conversation. Of course, since Twitter changed the reply settings yesterday, I am once again in doubt.

Since when has that indexing been happening?

It's always been done, since Twitter has been sending out RSS feeds. Google indexes pretty much everything that has an RSS feed, especially if it's a large service such as Twitter. Facebook is a closed environment, a walled garden so all your updates there are only visible for your friends. However, Google sees and indexes every tweet and I clearly use Twitter differently from my blog: Twitter is more spontaneous, outgoing, personal and informal than my blog. By having my tweets indexed, it adds a lot of noise to my Google results.

A leaky garden?

Yes, Twitter is very leaky.

If you were thinking about cultural organisations and the cultural scene, would you see a bigger role for blogs and bloggers than they occupy right now?

Definitely. For example, Dutch newspaper nrc.next[81] just changed their website to a blog. Instead of just duplicating the news from their paper, they add extra (web) information on their blog. It is a big change! Museums are actively starting to Twitter as well. One even made a 'how to' manual for its employees.

Here are some examples:

- Culture blogging in Holland: http://teletekstisdood.blogspot.com
- New and interesting is also: http://non-fiction.nl/
- And http://n8.nl/ – it is there, a cult scene, but mostly group blogs.

And for your own blog, does audience reach matter for you? Or is the repository/documentation function the most important element for you? I also understood that you are not interested in commercialising your blog (or are you)?

Yes. I think it's hard to maintain an individual blog because of the need to update, especially if you cover a niche scene such as research or culture. It may be hard to blog once a day as well as working. Someone who has successfully turned his blog into a day job and a commercial success is www.nalden.net.

People still consider blogging to be a non-paid job or also as a prestigious CV building job. I was recently asked by a big cultural conference organiser to blog for them for free.

I do not understand why blogging is not seen as a regular job in the Netherlands. Blogging is a skill, just like being a photographer or an accountant.

I agree, and I think it requires different journalistic skills than for print-publishing, especially given the immediacy and the ability to link and network your content. Of the bloggers I interviewed, only a few of them were actually paid, but they regarded it as a (necessary) addition to their practice, a tool to create platforms, etc.

I don't want to monetise my own blog, because it is a research blog and I am happy to pay 100 Euros per year for hosting etc. because it is a representation of who I am and what I do. But if someone else asks me to blog for their organisation, it is a different question, especially if the organisation in question has a budget. What I regularly do is blog for conferences in return for a conference ticket. One was actually co-financed by a newspaper. But live blogging conferences is hard work because of the immediacy.

But could you make a living from it, do you think (e.g. if you devoted more time to it)?

I recently blogged for the Next Web[82] for three days – I had a wonderful time, saw interesting

speakers such as Andrew Keen, met interesting people such as Matt Mullenweg from Automattic/ Wordpress[83] – but I am exhausted after three days.

So did they pay you?

No – I received a conference ticket, I was introduced to a lot of interesting people, had some interesting conversations and drank great Chardonnay with new contacts. It was well worth it and I wouldn't have missed it.

BUT, no, I don't think I would be able to live off it, at least now. But there is hope.[84]

Well that is great but… will it take a few more years in Europe?

Yes. I previously blogged for www.theblogherald.com for money. I was paid a small amount per post, but it's hard to make a part-time/full-time living off it. Especially live blogging is not something you can do full-time since it is too energy consuming and you are not able to see/hear everything while you are blogging at a conference.

Of course, it is great to build your profile as a blogger!

Yes, I use it as a way to build my profile. Right now, I seem to have an established profile because organisations are approaching me. So it's time to take the next step.

So what are the next steps?

Steps to professionalising blogging within culture:

- Getting started with blogging;
- Building a profile;
- Live blog conferences in exchange for a ticket;
- Live blog conferences for compensation.

During step three you are blogging the whole time, so you are not able to actually hear all the keynote speeches. So step four would be to blog two out of four keynotes and enjoy the rest of them! It is not my dream to become a paid professional blogger. However, I would love to see part-time blogging as a job.

Or build up a team to blog for you, or together?

Yes, I teamed up with someone at the Next Web, but either you are taking notes or you are writing a blog post from your notes. With the Masters of Media blog, we went to a lot of conferences organised by the Institute of Network Cultures with a whole team of about five bloggers, so we could all blog some sessions and listen to others.

I think it could be very interesting if an organisation like LabforCulture would set up a blogging team to cover European cultural events – some kind of affiliation for bloggers with an organisation, and a common umbrella body to report, reflect and disseminate.

I know for a fact that a lot of Masters of Media would have loved to go to the Next Web, but they couldn't afford a ticket. Not even with a student discount. Of course the Next Web has enough publicity, but other events have not. Conferences should acknowledge the publicity bloggers can create for them. Bloggers are just like press. At least I see them as having the same status!

There is also a need to support future bloggers and journalists, and a big need for critical writing in that field!

I see the potential for a new platform with new media students from the University of Amsterdam and other universities/art schools. There are plenty of students with different

motivations for wanting to blog a conference:

- It is their research subject;
- General interest;
- No money to actually go there.

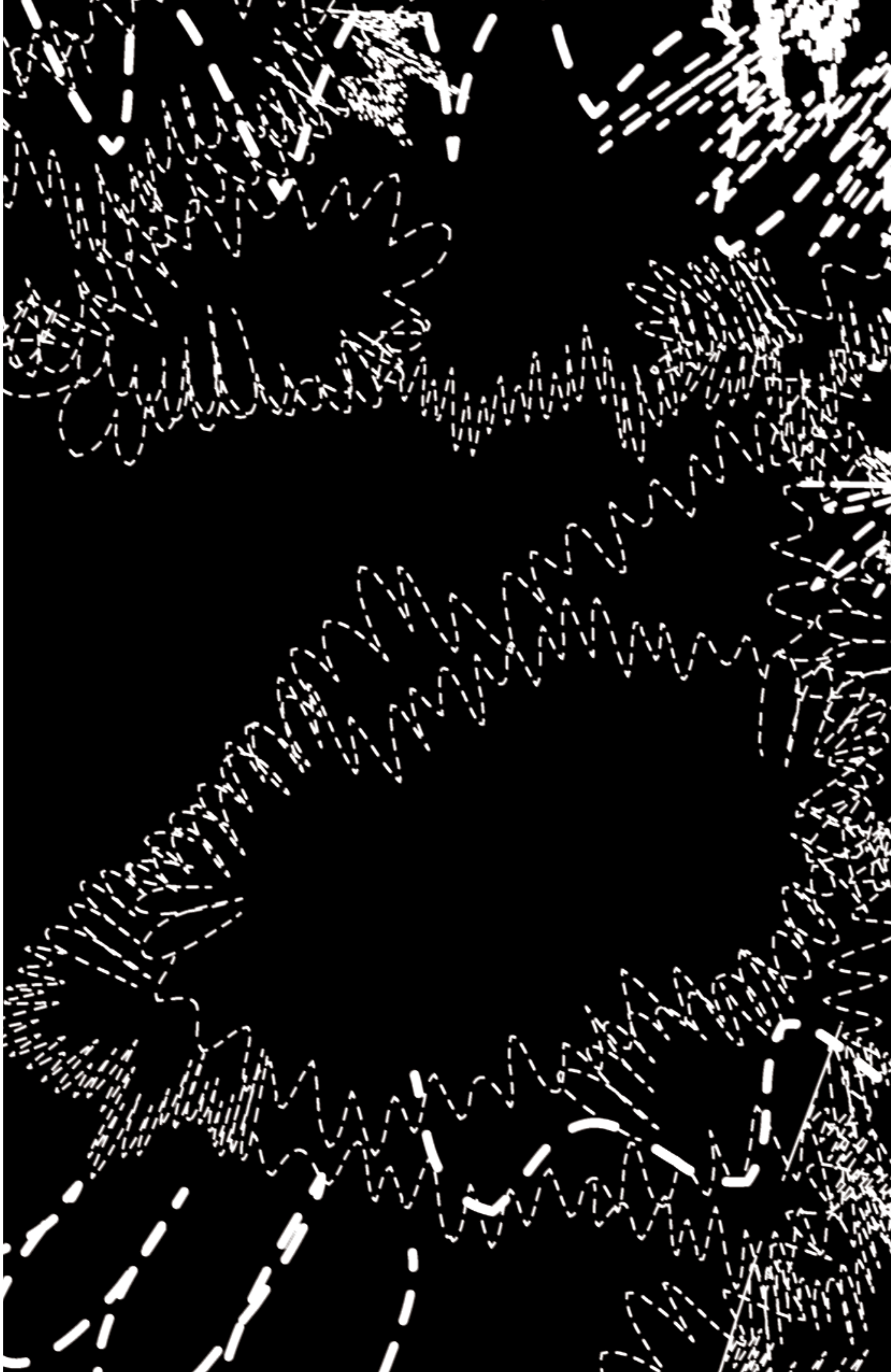
MoM has different types of content: essays, videos, short ramblings, media critiques, conference coverage etc. I think blogging skills are important, because the web is a platform people should learn to write for! The Metareporter blog[85] was a first encounter with blogs for most students. They really had to find their blogging 'voice'.

Are there any other blogs or other online resources relating to culture that you would recommend?

- http://cultuur.twittergids.nl/ and http://twittergids.nl/;
- Cut-up[86] of course is a famous Dutch (though published in English) blog/magazine with cultural critique – but it's so hard to find contributors;
- Another big Dutch art/culture blog is TrendBeheer.[87]

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69 http://www.annehelmond.nl
70 http://www.blogherald.com
71 http://mastersofmedia.hum.uva.nl
72 http://thenextweb.com
73 http://www.annehelmond.nl/2008/09/08/google-expands-its-indexing-focus-to-actions-within-social-networks
74 http://www.metareporter.nl
75 http://www.annehelmond.nl/2009/01/12/slidespace-on-blogs-blog-art-and-the-network
76 See www.slideshare.net/annehelmond/blogs-blog-art-and-the-network-presentation
77 http://blogspot.jodi.org
78 http://www.wefeelfine.org
79 http://iwantyoutowantme.org
80 http://www.sndrv.nl/publicityplant
81 http://www.nrcnext.nl
82 http://thenextweb.com
83 http://automattic.com
84 See http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124026415808636575.html
85 http://metareporter.nl
86 http://www.cut-up.com
87 http://trendbeheer.com





Robert Misik

About Robert Misik

Robert Misik was born in Austria and mostly lives in Vienna and the Waldviertel. He also enjoys being in Berlin. He writes books, critiques, articles and essays, as well as his own weblog at www.misik.at. He became the first Austrian journalist to publish a weekly video blog 'FS-Misik', which appears on the website of the Austrian newspaper, Der Standard.[88] (Der Standard is an independent, left-liberal Austrian newspaper.) In 2008, Misik received the Austrian Federal Prize for Cultural Journalism (Österreichischer Staatspreis für Kulturpublizistik).

Misik.at is Robert Misik's blog for commentary and analysis on political and societal issues.

The following interview between Annette Wolfsberger and Robert Misik took place via Facebook chat in German on 1 June 2009.

When did you start blogging and what prompted you to do it?

When I started I honestly did not regard myself as a blogger. I just asked a friend to put this site together for me on www.misik.at. I put more or less everything on it that I had written – articles, commentary, columns for print press. It was more of a collection of my texts that usually appear scattered elsewhere. That started approximately three years ago. Then I started video-blogging on Der Standard's website just about one and a half years ago.

Is the archiving or repository function still the main function of your blog, or has it also developed into a complementary forum for you – besides your journalistic activities with Profil, Der Standard and others?

It is still the main function of my blog. It rarely happens that I write something just for the blog. On the other hand, it has a complementary function because I know that now a lot of people just find my writing directly via the blog.

This makes my next question superfluous, which was how your offline activities relate to your online ones? If I am not wrong, you were Der Standard's first video blogger?

Was that idea initiated by you or by Der Standard?
Yes, I was Der Standard's first video blogger – I think I was even the first Austrian one. Der Standard contacted me to contribute to their website. I said that I would only do it if I could do it via video. Video blogging currently is the most advanced and most interesting medium.

The content of your video-blog is mostly critical weekly commentaries on Austrian political life – is the choice of subjects entirely up to you?
Yes, that's entirely my decision. They only know what I have done once I've uploaded the content. A lot of it is recorded from home or on the road, and so we don't communicate too much about it.

Is it correct that you finance your blog and blogging through your offline journalistic activities? This interests me since in a few other European countries (e.g. Poland or the Netherlands) newspapers have either swapped their online editions to blogs (www.nrcnext.nl) or pay for (cultural) bloggers (http://kultura20.blog.polityka.pl/).
Yes, I do. Although you cannot really talk about financing – the site hardly costs anything. But then it also does not generate any income. At least not directly. Indirectly it does via publicity, book sales, (online) presence, availability and accessibility. For the video-blog at Der Standard, I receive a normal honorarium, like a writer-columnist.

I do understand that the blog in itself does not cost too much – but the time you invest in maintaining it and contributing to it does in a way.
Yes, that is unpaid. Of course I could consider generating income via www.misik.at, for example, with advertisements or similar things. But to be honest, I'm not business-minded enough for that, and I also do not want to waste my time with it. On top of that, I don't think I would earn enough money with it. I earn my money via 'traditional' media, and online via the video-blog.

I do find that interesting because, with blogs, there are so many different financial models that are being applied and tested. If you consider video blogging as the most advanced medium at the moment, what will be your next online step? Do you have plans for developing your blog or are you satisfied with its status quo?
Well... generally I'm satisfied with the status quo. It's being received very well and many people enjoy reading it. One could professionalise it, but then I'd need staff to do that. And thus there would be far more organisational and logistical demands. Currently I'm doing everything myself, writing, recording (myself) and editing. I think I will continue this way until people get bored of it.
Concerning development, I'm thinking about other things, for example longer documentaries, but these would not replace the weekly columns, just add to them on an irregular basis. Or another new project might be a video column for a German newspaper, so that I reach beyond Austria. But these are only initial ideas.
I also do not want this to take too much of my time. One day to one and a half days per week is enough. I want to reserve my remaining time for written essays and similar things.

Do video columns already exist within German newspapers?
Yes, they do exist in Germany, for example, Matthias Matussek at Der Spiegel,[89] or Richter at the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.[90] And I don't know how many others...

How much do you know about your readers/viewers? Are they mainly Austrian? Do you follow your stats, and are you influenced by the responses of your readership? How important is an active community for you?
Response of viewers: well, there is a response opportunity in the form of postings at Der Standard. Of course, you find a lot of lunatics in these forums, so it's not very representative. But I do read all of the postings. The responses that I receive via Facebook are more interesting. Yes, for sure I'm influenced by them one way or another, and apart from that, I involve them once in a while. It does happen that I post a call to support my investigations, and I usually receive many links and suggestions.
And as far as statistics are concerned, I know rather exactly how many people watch the video-blog...

... I'm asking because many bloggers I've spoken to don't seem to be interested in statistics at all.
Interestingly enough, I don't follow them for the written contributions, just for the video-blog.

Would you consider blogging as a recognised part of (Austrian) journalism? How far does blogging play a role? Is blogging, for example, already part of the higher education system?
This is changing rapidly. I would say that blogging is also recognised within Austrian journalism. Concerning reputation, for example, it is not considered inferior to normal columns. I don't know if blogging is part of the education system – I don't think so.
Although... this is wrong! It seems to be part of it, since I've been interviewed by several students in the previous month. One student is even writing a seminar paper about me. So blogging seems to be on the radar within the education system.

A different question: Does a definition like 'cultural blog' mean anything to you, or do you find blog definitions like these rather superfluous? (Within the LabforCulture research we have defined cultural blog(ger)s as ones that have popular and contemporary arts and culture as their main focus. And mainly looked into individual, non-institutional blogs.)
I don't find the term redundant. Of course there are cultural blogs, just as there are, for example, business blogs (which are, by the way, extremely good!). But I am definitely not a cultural blogger. My thematic focus is too broad for that. I do write cultural and culture-theoretical contributions, but I write more political and many economic ones. So I only partially belong to that cultural blogging category.

Which is also why I was interested in talking to you – to include perspectives outside the cultural spectrum. I also interviewed a research blogger previously, and although there is some overlap, it is different.
Yes, I also experience that. The departmental categories that are narrowly defined in normal journalistic practice are not relevant within blogging.

In your opinion, is there a blogging scene in Austria, and specifically a cultural one?
Yes, there is a blogging scene. A cultural blogging scene? Not sure if that exists. The non-institutional bloggers mainly run political opinion blogs. Martin Blumenau is an outstanding cultural blogger, but his blog is an institutional one on the fm4 site.[91]

Do you yourself read other blogs as well? This might sound like a strange

question, but I've spoken to several people who write a blog but do not seem to read other people's blogs.

Yes, I do read other blogs – Blumenau, and several business blogs: weissgarnix,[92] of course, also Krugman[93] on the New York Times, and about a dozen others via Google-reader.

If you look back at the development of your blog, is there anything you would do radically differently? Or to put it another way, is there anything you regard as a big mistake or failure?

Nope, nothing. Of course, everything was very trashy at the start. Now I have better equipment, and have got better just by the routine of doing it. But those unrehearsed beginnings were also very okay – I really would not want to do anything differently!

If you compare your print writing to your blogging, what are the biggest differences for you apart from the direct feedback of your readers/viewers?

Since in the strict sense of the word I'm only video-blogging, the difference is of course huge: videos are more direct, more subjective and their characteristic style is completely different to, for example, an essay for a newspaper. There are miles in between them. And I do enjoy that. It's a very different style, which also has elements of visual language. Apart from that, the rhythm of the texts is different: the rhythm of a text needs long waves. With video-blogs you need a fast rhythm – similar to video clips.

And what is the most important role for cultural blogging in your opinion?

The most important role is probably that voices that otherwise wouldn't be noticed enter the political discourse. To become a recognised voice in the print world, you have to jump endless institutional hurdles, survive thousands of hours of editorial team meetings. Usually this is not the case with blogging.

Your comment concerning video-blogging is interesting also in the context of Jill Walker Rettberg's book Blogging.[94] The book provides a useful introduction to blogging and compares the development of print media from the 15th century onwards with the development of blogging.

I've never read books about blogging. Maybe I should start doing that.

Do you have any hints for cultural bloggers?

I don't think so. Everyone needs to find his or her own style, especially in this field. Therefore, tips are difficult. Personally, I've always done things and then seen where they lead me. The starting point often was to try and understand things technically.

Do you mean looking into the added value of blogging from its technical side?

No, I meant to learn to really understand things like, how do I cut video? How do I upload to YouTube?

Banal questions like these that every 14-year old could answer, but not me being 43 years old.

Yes, that is the difference between us and the Millennials[95] (the generation following Generation X who have grown up in a digital environment)…

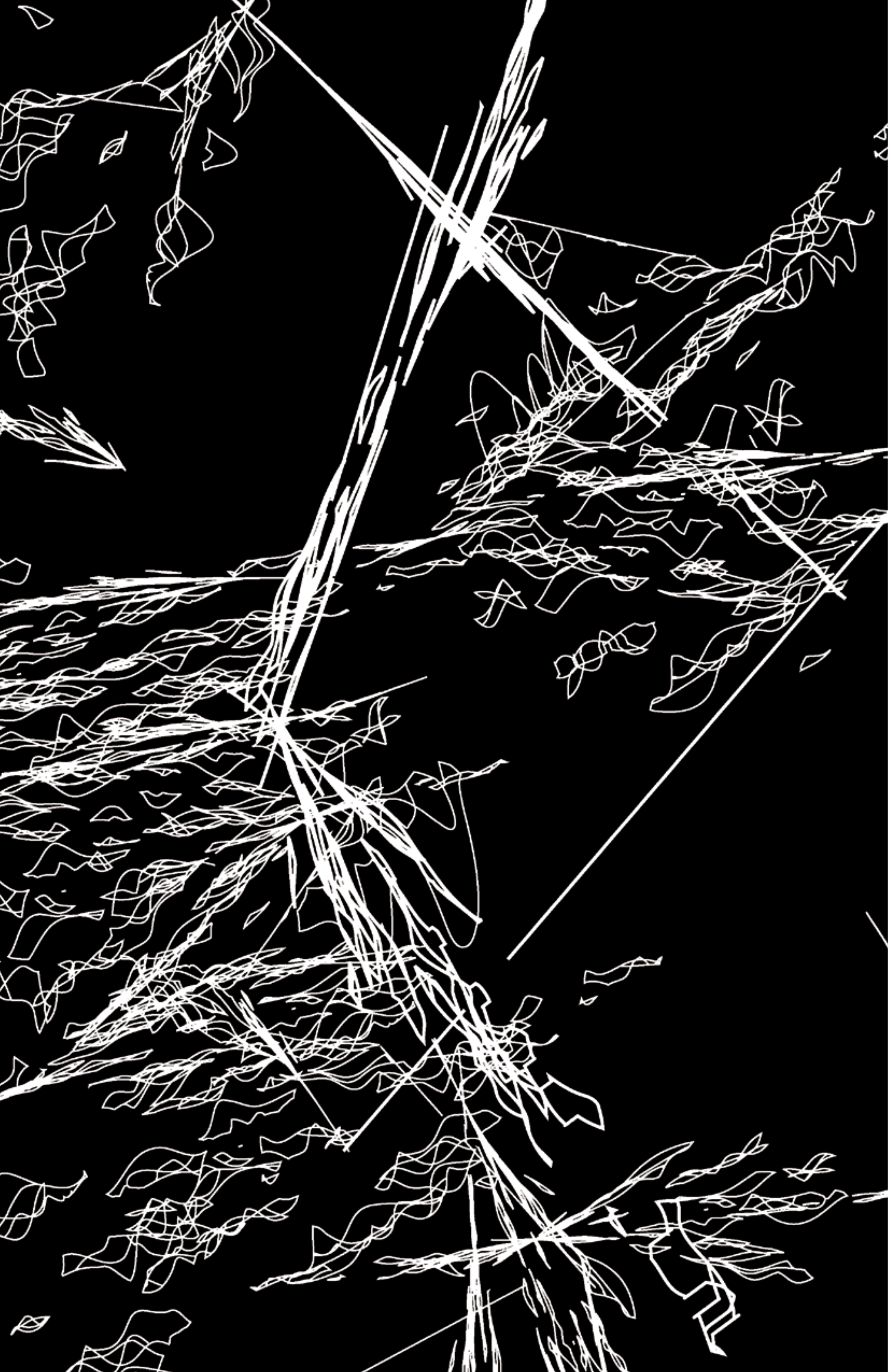
Yes, that's how it started with me: by doing. And then I checked out videos of others and looked into what I liked and copied that, and added my own style elements.

So returning to your question about the hints, this is what I would say: In the end you need to have your very own style. Otherwise you drown in the blogosphere.

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88 http://derstandard.at
89 http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/0,1518,k-6995,00.html
90 http://faz-community.faz.net/blogs/berlin/default.aspx
91 http://fm4.orf.at/blumenau
92 http://www.weissgarnix.de
93 http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com
94 http://jilltxt.net
95 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millenial





Marta Peirano & José Luis de Vicente

About Marta Peirano and José Luis de Vicente

Spanish cultural bloggers Marta Peirano and José Luis de Vicente were instrumental in the launch of the influential collective Spanish blog Elastico[96] in 2003. When the blogosphere was still in its infancy in Spain, the writers on Elastico started blogging about digital rights and copyleft, digital art, video games and multimedia. All four founding writers have become influential in the cultural scene in their own right. Their collective blog has become a repository for longer essays and reflection pieces, rather than a daily updated resource. Elastico came together as a way to make e-culture more accessible. Elastico covered topics such as open source, gaming and learnt behaviour, peer-2-peer networks and piracy/sharing of material online.[97]

The following interview between Annette Wolfsberger and Marta Peirano (MP) & José Luis de Vicente (JL) was held on 11 June 2009 via Skype chat.

One of my first questions is this: when you started with Elastico, was there a specific reason or thing that initiated it? Did you start together, collaboratively, or did one of you initiate it, and the other(s) followed?

JL: Ladies first.

MP: It will be interesting to see if we agree on that one! There were mainly two reasons: the first one was that we four – Antonio Córdoba, Nacho Escolar, Jose Luis (JL) and myself – had known each other for quite some time and wanted to do something together. If I am not mistaken, we were all writing for the same newspaper at the time. Antonio and JL went to university together; Nacho and I were basically dating. We met around the digital journalism congress, right JL? We all agreed there was a need for a new kind of journalism regarding a number of interesting topics.

Thus a blog was born... When you started, were there many blogs at that time in Spain?

JL: Actually we met in February 2001 and we didn't start Elastico until October 2003. Both Nacho and Marta already had their own blogs.

MP: We wanted to move digital

culture from technology sections to culture ones. And change the way the traditional media was dealing with issues like P2P or video games.
JL: Yes, that was very important for us! I think it also worked so well because we were friends and interested in a loose set of topics related to culture and tech[nology] in different ways.

And that would have probably been very difficult within the newspaper... Were you all working for the cultural department of the newspaper?

MP: It was a constant fight! And no, no! We were all in technology! Back then, everything related to 'the internet' was tied to technology.
JL: Actually, that has always been a great fight. We always had to justify that these were cultural topics, not tech[nology] topics. Me and Marta were the people doing culture topics on the tech sections; Antonio also... Nacho was more into digital culture, apart from digital politics and rights.

Sounds like an interesting mix. Have the four of you been working together since then? And has your focus shifted strongly since the beginning?

JL: Not exactly. Our personal careers have gone in different directions. They always were intended to, since we had different backgrounds. Nacho has been a newspaper director; he is now a columnist and opinion writer. Marta directed the culture section of a newspaper until recently, and now is writing books. Antonio is at university, finished his thesis and is teaching, and I have worked mostly as a curator.

Wow, they all seem like very successful careers!

MP: Well...
JL: I think only Marta and Nacho were the real journalists and I think Marta is really a writer, only she doesn't know ;)
MP: The fact that we always intended to do very different things was one of the reasons why Elastico existed in the first place: very different people connected to the same topics.

So you had different viewpoints?

JL: I think Elastico existed because we were friends having interesting conversations about similar topics; things that have interested us through the years include digital rights, copyleft, digital art, video games, digital film, music videos, literature... Not all of us were interested in all of them, but together we covered a broad spectrum. Marta and Antonio were stronger in literature, Marta and me in digital art.
MP: It was the variety of our personal backgrounds and ambitions that made it exciting and dynamic.

Was there anything like it in Spain when you started?

MP: I am pretty sure there was not!
JL: There was nothing like it, both in topics and in tone! We always made it very accessible. We wanted to reach everybody – not only people in specific fields and that, I believe, made it influential.

So it was also a question of making digital culture (or e-culture) more accessible...

JL: For me, absolutely! No one was writing in Spanish about that combination of topics.

...and show its relevance to the broader cultural field?

MP: I would say that, yes. But also to introduce a new approach to the way media dealt with these topics. Very good examples would be:

- Linux is for computer engineers.
- Video games make children violent.
- P2P is piracy.
- Copyleft is for losers.

JL: Contemporary art is relevant!
MP: Yap, I guess we could go on forever XDDDDD.[98]
JL: I hate the [fact that] writing in art criticism, for instance, is absolutely self-referential. We didn't want to do that!

You said Elastico was becoming relevant. How could you feel that? Feedback, audience, references in other media?

JL: Well personally, one of the most rewarding experiences in the last few years is coming across people who tell me that Elastico was very influential for them. People like artists, art collectives, curator collectives or other bloggers. In 2003, the Spanish blogosphere was blooming – and we had just arrived two years earlier than most! Also, because we were very didactic, we were opening up references and ideas that still had not broken in the cultural debate in Spain.
MP: True! Also we got used to reading our own texts copy-pasted in national newspapers in the cultural sections! That was both infuriating and flattering, of course.
JL: Then in 2005 we organised an event in Barcelona called Copyfight, which definitely marked a transitional point, I believe, in the public discussion around copyright in Spain.

So you were just ahead of everyone both off- and online. You must have had quite a community by then. Was it an active one?

JL: One thing for us is that we have never been in the same city. Marta and Nacho [lived in the same city for] some time, but then Marta was abroad for a long time, so we saw each other very little. Now, for example, I am based in Barcelona and Marta in Madrid. This means that any sense of community for us has been mostly a dispersed, fluid one. I think it was also a way of brainstorming in public.

So it mainly is (or was) a platform for you to exchange with each other, a kind of semi-public conversation?

MP: Absolutely, I think one of the reasons why Elastico was fun was precisely because we used it as a conversation tool for the four of us.
JL: I am very interested in the idea of 'transparent research'. It was a conversation between the four of us, yes, but everyone was invited.
MP: That led to very funny discussions within our own blog – always interesting though and totally open.

So currently, is it still the four of you, or have others joined in, or has anyone left?

JL: Well, it's very dispersed right now. I would say there is still something of the four of us, but it is not happening on Elastico. More in the conversation between the different blogs, and other means like Twitter, Facebook... it depends. Nacho and me are active on Twitter, Marta and Antonio not so much. Marta is very active on her blog.[99]
MP: My blog – I can say this proudly – was the first of all our blogs!
JL: Also, Marta commissioned me last year to do a weekly section on her newspaper and for me that was really the Elastico spirit!

Would you say that your blog was a tool, its peak is over, and you continue experimenting with other tools to communicate and disseminate within and beyond your group?

JL: It's a community, really. I prefer describing it as a family – for me, Marta and Nacho and Antonio are more family than anything else.
MP: It is true that we are all very, intensely busy, and that reflects badly on our blogs.
JL: Yes, we don't work that hard anymore on the blogs because we are awfully busy and it's a shame.

So your blogging is not very directly linked to the jobs you're doing now?
JL: In my case it is, it always has been. In Nacho's case also.
MP: Though I think our engineering in Spanish culture is more apparent now.
JL: Exactly. Marta defined it perfectly – we are blogging less, but our influence in culture is way bigger.

Has the Elastico clan taken over culture in Spain?
MP: Nacho has launched and directed the last national newspaper in Spain; JL is redefining digital culture in Spanish institutions and Antonio is probably writing the next most influential novel in Spanish since Bolaño.

So you could say that, with the blog, you achieved your aim... getting technology out into culture!
MP: XDDDD.
JL: Well, this may sound incredibly pompous and pretentious. It was not something so big, honestly, but our professional careers were taking off as we were getting to our mid thirties... and the net is changing, it always is.

That poses an interesting question: what will you do with Elastico? Leave it as it stands and archive it?
JL: I have a very clear idea now. I used to be anxious about not updating it, not putting enough time into it. But now, I very clearly believe that the architecture of the conversation online has changed. You can say something once a month and still be heard. I have been doing it and it works!

So it's not so much about frequency anymore?
JL: Well, people know about it because of Twitter, RTing,[100] Facebook, RSS... so blogs are no longer diaries.
MP: I think what JL means is that not updating so often is not an issue anymore since RSS and Twitter.
JL: Blogs are now the place where you post long pieces that don't fit anywhere else. Blogs are your notebooks of essays and it's perfectly fine. Something, for instance, that I don't want to do anymore is blogging about what other people are saying somewhere else.

Now I only want to blog original content to contribute to the conversation.

Rather than filter...
JL: Yes, there are way better filters now as someone said, my favourite blogs now are my friend's Delicious feeds.

Have you seen the (cultural) blogging scene in Spain change a lot since you started (e.g. blogging having become a recognised strand of journalism)?
JL: Uff, that is always tough to say: all newspapers produce blogs; writers have blogs; blogs have become way more mainstream, of course, but most of those do not engage in the conversation.
MP: It has also become the new form of column,
JL: in our conversation at least,
MP: which is interesting now that journalism is more opinionated than ever.

So what about you, JL. Do you also have your own active blog?
MP: She got you there!
JL: Not really, when I want to say something I use Elastico. Also I am having a lot of fun on Twitter.
MP: He is a Twittermaniac, though!

But you prefer not to use it anymore, Marta? And rather retreat to your own blog?
JL: She is a star on her own!
MP: I was very active for quite some time in both and then the increasing amount of work made it impossible for me to write for both.
JL: But she got her book deal through her blog.
MP: Also, when I joined the newspaper it became impossible to write at all!

But you're not really integrating the Twitter feed into Elastico, JL?
JL: No, because honestly I don't believe in reading Twitter asynchronously! I think you have to do it in real time.

I think Twitter is more like a cafe conversation, blogging more like a newspaper.

MP: Well what we are not saying here is that I used to take care of the 'insides' of all our blogs and haven't been gardening that part for quite a long time. It is like the bad weeds have taken over our house.
JL: But we are renovating soon because we are moving technology...
MP: Yap and now, facing the cleaning of both my blog and Elastico feels like a titanic effort!
JL: At the same time I wonder if most people reading are not doing it through RSS, which means they only get the text and images of the entries and not the rest?
MP: And it would be necessary to include new features like Twitter box and more flexible formats that would allow us to be more prolific.
JL: I don't really know...

Does Elastico still feel like something you want to keep alive or has it become more like an obligation?
MP: Both Nacho and JL have entered the 'media on the run' format. That is to say, posting through their Blackberries, etc. I think we have to adapt Elastico to that new reality if we want to resuscitate it properly!
JL: No, it does not feel like an obligation! It's definitely something I want to keep alive because:

1. It has a very good page rank, people looking for us get there many times.
2. It is an archive of a time of our lives, brings [back] many good memories.
3. It's a useful tool, it reaches people.

MP: And what I think about the cultural blogging scene in Spain has changed since we started: oh yes, very much indeed! I just don't know if it is for the best XDDD.

Has Elastico played a role in that transformation?
MP: About Elastico's role in it, I am not sure...
JL: I am unable to answer this question. I feel myself belonging now to a more diffuse international network than to a Spanish scene.
MP: Yes, that is true for most of us!

Did you ever think about writing your blog in another language than Spanish?
JL: Although I still follow people in Spain, of course, like Juan Freire[101] or zemos98,[102] this was ALWAYS an issue of discussion.
MP: We would have to compete with Régine! And that is a lost cause I am afraid.
JL: I will tell this story...

1. We met Régine when she was starting WMMNA,[103]
2. we became friends,
3. she read Elastico,
4. we have been sort of colleagues since then.

We didn't want to do it in English like Régine, because we believed we could have a more positive impact on our own community doing it in Spanish. In English, we would have been another culture blog. In Spanish it was a revulsive, in a way and I am proud of that!

Have you collaborated?

JL: Yes, many times. She even guest blogged on Elastico!

Were you ever thinking of running the blog as a full-time job?

MP: Si XDDD – hell, no!

I was asking because the Italians, like Digicult or Neural, decided to blog/publish bilingually.

JL: For me, it would have made way more sense professionally doing it in English. It would have been better for my career. But then, it would have been more of a job and it was never a job.
MP**:** Well, considering our premises… it would have been unproductive to write in English. We wanted to have an impact!

Would it have been a whole other thing to do it in English, and you'd have focused on other topics too?

MP: We wanted to change our fields of action in ways that were more adequate, and those were Spanish media and Spanish institutions!
JL: Mmm, I don't know! I would have LOVED to do it bilingually, like Neural. But I would have needed two lives! I am a slow writer…

Is your readership also international? South American, for example?

JL: Yes, many South American readers!

Is that also reflected in the content?

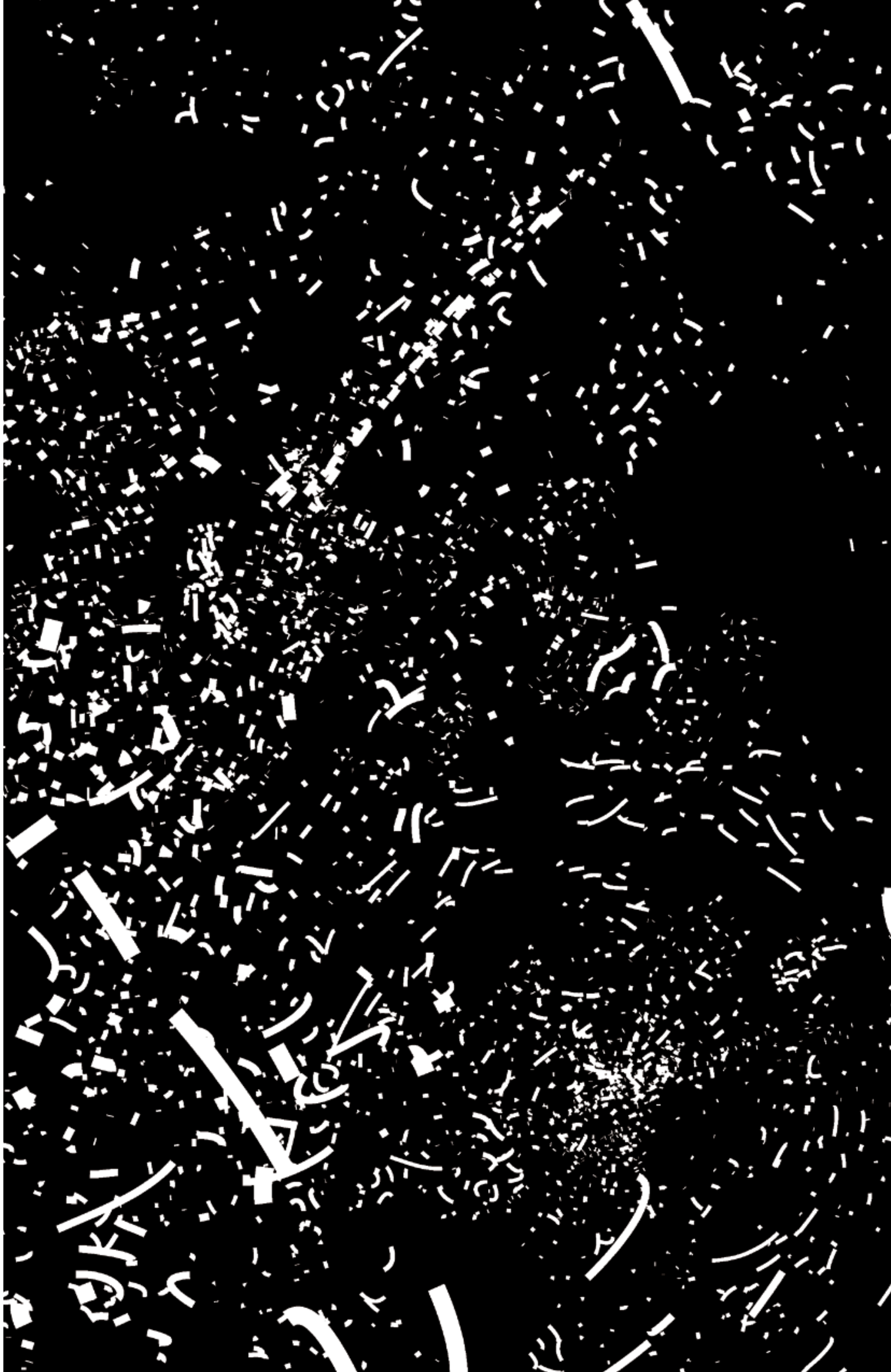
JL: Not really…

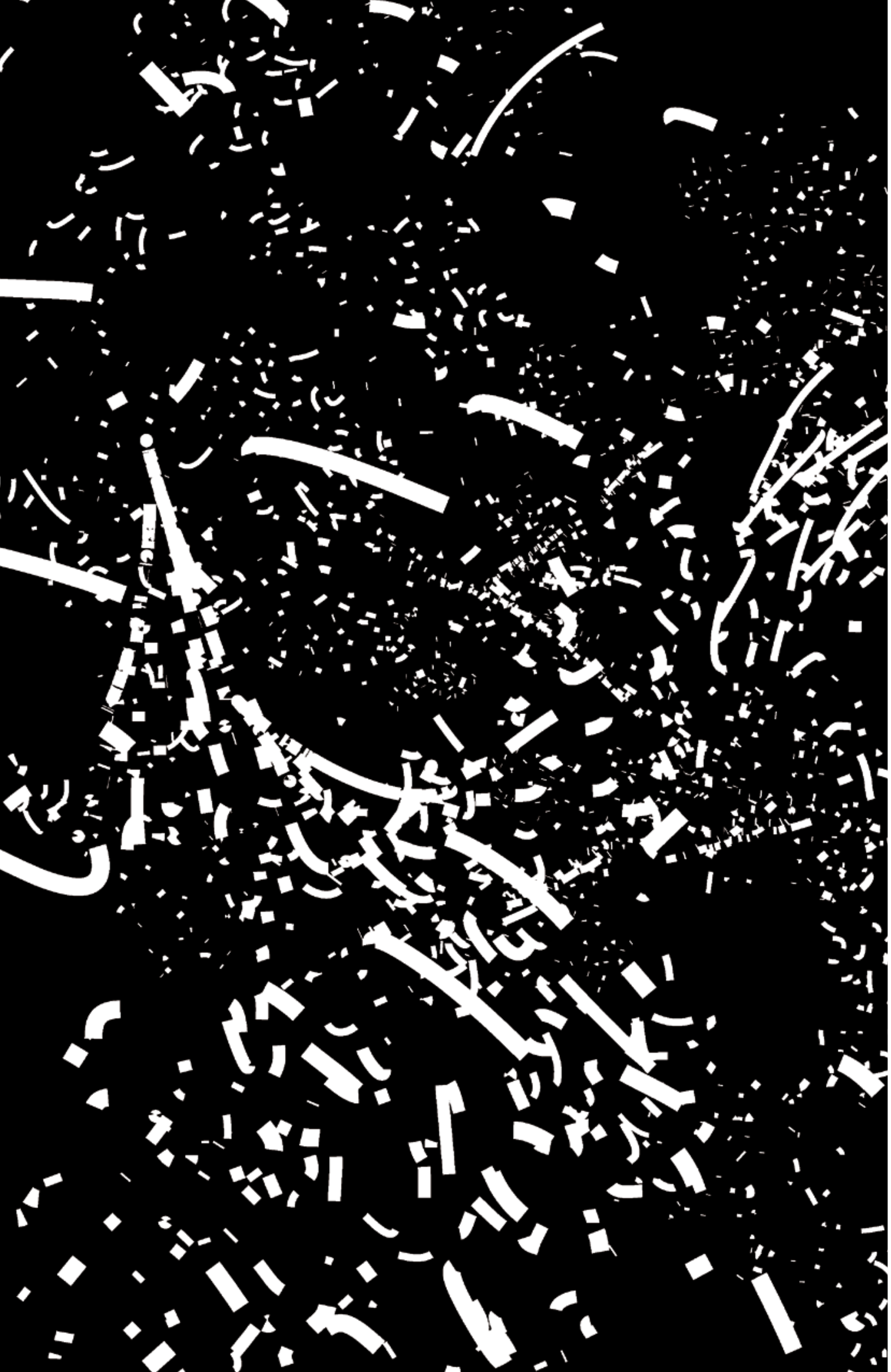
Are there any other blogs you would recommend?

MP: Hmm, good question. There is nothing like Reg's! That is just true. If this is to become a net, she would be Queen R!
JL: I am trying to suggest someone… I think my favourite bloggers are not in Europe now. And most of them are obsessive, focusing on single obscure topics, like Dan Hill of City Of Sound,[104] Andrew Vande Moere of Information Aesthetics,[105] Geoff Manaugh of BLDG|BLOG.[106] And there is this guy I am enjoying a lot now called Chris Heathcote.[107]
MP: I can't think about anyone either – well, there is the UbuWeb,[108] of course.

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96 http://elastico.net
97 http://www.elastico.net/archives/2006/02/arquitectura_es.html
98 *DD*, *XDDDD* or *XDDDDD* is a smiley often used in Spain. It can be 'translated' as *:-)*
99 http://lapetiteclaudine.com
100 RT stands for 'retweet' and means posting a message on Twitter already posted by someone else. It is similar to forwarding an email.
101 http://nomada.blogs.com
102 http://www.zemos98.org
103 http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com
104 http://www.cityofsound.com
105 http://infosthetics.com
106 http://bldgblog.blogspot.com
107 http://anti-mega.com/antimega
108 http://ubu.com





Alessandro Ludovico

About Alessandro Ludovico
Alessandro Ludovico is a media critic and has been editor-in-chief of Neural magazine[109] since 1993. He is the author of several essays on digital culture and he co-edited Mag.net Reader.[110] Alessandro is one of the founding contributors of the Nettime community.[111] He is also one of the founders of the Mag.Net[112] (Electronic Cultural Publishers) organisation, teaches at the Academy of Art in Carrara and was recently a research fellow at Willem De Kooning Academy in Rotterdam.

Neural is a magazine on new media art, hacktivism and e-music that is published three times a year in English and Italian. It is complemented by its blog,[113] which features daily news and reviews.

The following interview between Annette Wolfsberger and Alessandro Ludovico was held on 2 June 2009 in Rotterdam.

What was the trigger for you to start *Neural*, and what format did it have at the start?

I started with the first print magazine 16 years ago, in November 1993, and the first online presence of Neural was in May 1997 – something that I cannot really call a 'blog'. It was a page with a few posts, supposed to be updated every 15 days and that's what I tried to do. The site was meant to be a small issue, like a bonus to the magazine, but it ended up simply not working because it needed so much work and maintenance. It included text, pictures, and for every issue there was a piece of software art that could be downloaded. For me the blog was a reflection of the printed edition.

I was always very interested in publishing, but I was also a geek. I bought my first Commodore 64 when I was 16 and I started to work for an underground electronic music label, the only one in Bari where I live, with stuff like industrial, esoteric music – quite outspoken for a city like Bari! At some point I proposed the idea of printing a magazine to the friend I was working with because we were both interested in all the stuff that was happening; electronic publishing and the internet had just arrived, but there

was no magazine about it. Neural concentrates on digital culture – that's what we would call it now. At that time we called it 'cyberculture', and that included and still includes art, music and politics, all within or mediated by digital forms. Actually, the first issue of Neural was published six months after the first Wired[114] issue!

Wow…
I was not aware that this Wired magazine was going to be published. There was no internet in that sense. Actually, the first thing we published before the magazine was a hybrid product with my friend's record label called Minus Habens Records (which still exists). I was very passionate about virtual reality (VR) developments, so I started to collect stuff and I even did a couple of trips to see these VR machines.

What we came up with in 1992 was the Virtual Reality Handbook,[115] with all the physical addresses of producers, magazines, artists, you name it, and a few conceptual texts about virtual reality. It was a very thin book, about 40 pages, with a CD of music inspired by the topic. The book was bilingual English and Italian and was sold out in less than a year. It was shipped from Japan to the US, so I thought why not push a bit harder and produce a magazine? We can do it! And that's how it started…

What is your background? Are you an artist yourself?
It is the networked spirit of internet culture that fascinated me. My background was in publishing and music, and my arts background can be described as the mail art movement. Both mail art, and art made through the postal network really fascinated me: not that much because it was so radical that everyone could be an artist, make art and make a show; it was fun for me but mostly I was fascinated by the possibilities of inter-exchanging art on specific topics all over the world: the ephemeral network. And when the digital network arrived, I thought, 'wow – so here it is'!

That moment meant that I finally had the technological means to realise a synthesis of all these different things!

From the very beginning, the concept of the magazine was to be a node.

I never wanted to make the most beautiful magazine about everything digital in the world, but instead a very good magazine that was complementary to other efforts happening elsewhere: to create a – potentially important – node in a networked environment. This network consisted of nodes that were interconnected, shared and exchanged p2p reviews, content contacts and made a bit of business to keep alive. Several of my initial contacts still exist, but many changed and do different things now.

Since 1993, print publishing has gone through major shifts, and I sometimes wonder why Neural is still a magazine, and not only digital or Print on Demand?
Print on Demand (POD) in my view should be an opportunity or an alternative for printing rather than an indicator for a philosophical shift. Printing Neural is not about printing a few copies. Neural is a worldwide distributed magazine, with distributors in the US, Australia and in Asia and Europe. So in my case it's not about saving on the initial printing costs, which POD is mainly about.

For me, printing a magazine in 2009 is something completely different from in 1993. In the past 16 years this brainchild of mine has become something I feel really attached to. It's a sort of statement to continue to print it, while it remains a challenge to find the right form, and a sustainable business model.

When I started together with a record label producer friend from Bari, we tried to publish bimonthly, but after three issues we decided that that was too much for us. We found a publisher, unfortunately a very inexperienced one who had no idea about how to launch a new product. We ended up signing an agreement that was not very beneficial for us, produced six issues, and then they went bankrupt due to a bad distribution agreement, and we ended up not being paid for two issues.

We learned our lesson: if you really want to do something like this, you should do it by yourself. I had to stop for a few months because I had to do my civil service, which was still mandatory at that time. And then in 1997 I restarted by myself since my initial Neural partner wanted to pursue his own music career, while I was stubborn enough to carry on. Since 1997 I've seen many friends' magazines die, and the challenge was to constantly challenge, question and change every issue, and to try and survive. Maybe it was easier for me than for others because I was dealing with technology, so I was aware of some changes to come, but still it was continuously critical for Neural.

So what about the online presence of Neural. How did that develop and complement the magazine?
Well, at some point I realised that the online 'thing' updated every couple of weeks did not function. It was too much work and not worth it at the same time. I stopped for a few weeks and then thought if I continued doing it, it had to be daily – or not at all. It would not have made sense otherwise, no one would have returned to the site.

In 2000 I started with the new daily updated website – three news posts and one music review every day. I figured out it was not only about publishing, but also about networking. It was about being present and being visible as a node, and about playing an active role in the community – and at the same time be recognised by it. I saw it as my only chance as a publisher to make everyone aware of the online edition. Every time I published online content, I sent the people whose work I'd talked about, or the musician I'd reviewed, an email and asked them if they could post a link back to Neural. I did that daily for years, and it paid off! Now Neural has an average 7 out of 10 page range in Google ranking, and I've accumulated almost 15,000 incoming links.

From a reader's point of view, how would you describe the difference between the magazine and the online platform?
Of course there is a strategy. In the beginning print was king and online was an accessory. Now it's exactly the opposite, and I want to reward the readers of the magazine, my sponsor community: all the content online is free of charge, while you have to pay for the magazine subscription. From the start, the printed magazine had some content that is not online – all the interviews and the articles are only in print, while the rest (reviews, news) is also online.

This sounds like a lot of work, and a lot of passion, but how has Neural, and how have you, managed to survive economically?

I am doing much less myself now than in the beginning. I've learned to delegate as much as possible, and to focus on the things that only I can do to be a serious player. I would like to delegate more, but I still need to do a lot of things myself due to financial restraints. Neural is not my main income. I've always seen it as an entry point for additional work, even if it might sound absurd to do so much work paid for by other work. I'm very passionate about the magazine, but if I only did Neural I would get too obsessed. It's like a magic portal to access other inspiring opportunities.

Another priceless thing is the experience I gained in the past years about how to do 'it' and how to play with 'it'. I manage the magazine three times a year, and actually there is also the printed Italian edition that also should be published three times a year, but I'm currently slowing that down to concentrate on the English one.

***A propos* languages: Both the magazine and its online counterpart are bilingual English/Italian. It strikes me that also the Italian DigiCult is English/Italian, while in many other countries like Spain or France, resources like these would probably be in their native language only.**

In Italy there is a problem with foreign languages and language education. French used to be the second language, then it changed to English. Only in the past decade have Italians understood that English is the *lingua franca*, so it's still very important to use Italian if you want to be read and understood in Italy.

Of course it remains a problem to express complex issues in another language and reach the same level of sophistication, especially since IT in itself is a very complex language. But there are two levels to this problem: one is very much about comprehensiveness and the other one is Euro-English. It is another challenge. I now work with an English native speaker who has been proof-reading and editing the magazine and blog for a few years, but also I try to use Italian and Latin phrases to ease the complexity of the English language, to bastardise English with foreign words, be it Italian, German or Spanish – so that the final result is not bare native English, strictly spoken, but a kind of global correct English. This might also make the content more accessible for non-native speakers.

Looking back on the many years that you have worked on Neural, is there anything you think you would do very differently with the experience that you've got now?

One of the few things I'm good at is writing, and writing theory. I consider myself more of a theorist or a writer – publishing magazines is a very specific skill. But for example, I would find it difficult to be an artist. I've done a few projects over the past years like Google Will Eat Itself[116] and Amazon Noir[117] together with Paolo Cirio and Ubermorgen. I try to do them collaboratively and to maintain the role of the one who develops the theory and context. I'm more into organising things, bringing things together.

Even curating is still an esoteric practice for me. I did it a few times, but I think you need to go deep into it if you want to do it well – it's a very different concept.

You mentioned a sustainable economic model – what does that look like for Neural and yourself?

Neural is a cultural association but receives no public or private funding. In Italy, the funding situation is a very difficult and complicated one. Actually it's hell, mainly for (contemporary) arts, because there is so much ancient cultural heritage in Italy that most of the money goes in that direction. To receive funding, you need to more than just put in a funding application. You need to invest a lot of time in lobbying with decision-makers. For me, to receive funding in Italy would be like succeeding in being part of a system, which I have always refused because I wanted to concentrate on what I was doing.

Income is generated by paid subscription and advertisements, both online and offline. I have some hardcore subscribers who are more or less subscribing continuously. It's more than money, it's also about the recognition of the work you're doing. And since they have to renew their subscription annually, it's also about renewing their trust. The ads are a more complicated story. You have to be another person to sell them (writing is completely different from selling), but at some point I realised I needed to take responsibility and it just needed to be done.

On- and offline work totally differently, of course. I am not asking for subscription online, or donations, because that would not work at the moment. But there is a lifetime subscription: you pay 250 Euros once, so it's like a seven to eight year subscription, but it lasts until the end of your life! It's a kind of donation, but a substantial one, given that the annual subscription fee in Europe is 31 Euros, and worldwide $55. It's all shipped priority, so subscribers in the US receive the magazine within a week or ten days after shipping.

Back to the online/offline relationship – how active is your community, and how much does it influence the on- and offline Neural content and your writing?

The blog is not a classic blog because I don't allow for comments. I had to make choices – and I decided not to do it. Firstly, because I'm doing a printed magazine, I didn't want to pretend too much. Secondly, if I allow comments I cannot spend enough time on working on the magazine. But there is a community that's dealing with me continuously. It's not as lively as it would be if I had a comment function on the blog, but still there is a Neural community. People do get in touch, to ask for advice and tips about what to check out where, to feedback and to suggest content. And of course there is a possibility for face-to-face meetings, for example at festivals.

Have any of the social networks changed your way of publishing?

I tried to avoid Facebook for a long time, but then surrendered in November 2008. I had to check it out at some point, to find out more and to understand it on a personal level, rather than relying on second hand information from others. Although I think that for many reason it's a very dangerous thing, it's a very peculiar model of establishing personal contacts. About a month after joining I established the Neural group and after six months it had nearly 1,000 members – all of whom of course I know.

I'm trying to get inspired by every new thing I am doing. Facebook was inspiring and useful for a few reasons, but it did not change a lot for me. I learnt, for example, that people who're using Facebook reply quicker via FB than via mail, and it is very useful for me to remember birthdays of friends. But it didn't change the way of production or distribution of the

printed magazine or the blog.

Having had a network before, the whole online social networking thing just means that there are new tools facilitating implementation or management of the same network, but none of them seriously changes it. I think the richness of each of us is our own personal network, not the platform.

So you'll probably use a platform, switch to another one in a few years when there is a better one, but it is the network that counts, and how you deal with it.

I've experienced highs and lows in publishing, and during one of these lows a friend of mine told me to use my own network to solve the problem. Very valuable advice! It is this concept or *modus operandi* that has changed our lives one way or the other.

Going back to the concept of nodes, and the magic portal function of Neural that you mentioned: many opportunities (like just recently being research fellow at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam) are linked to Neural.

To continue on networks – Magnet (Magazine Network of Electronic Cultural Publishers) is another really important thing for me. I co-founded the network in 2002. Our motto was to collaborate rather than compete with each other, and we started to share knowledge, share and exchange experiences and support each other. Eleven magazine editors are part of the network, among them five really active members – Neural, Mute Magazine from London, Springerin from Vienna, Zehar from San Sebastian and 3/4 Revue from Bratislava. After the first, thanks to the great and inspiring work of Nat Muller, we've edited together another two Magnet Readers on the offline/online publishing relationship.[118]

We are operating within a really simple organisational model for exchange, but it might be time for a change, to include more editors than currently and move towards a platform for exchange for publishers who deal with digital culture, especially in print, and who want to share this peculiar moment of change and passage.

This also led to the beautiful opportunity of my research fellow work in Rotterdam, hosted by the Lectorate 'Communication in a Digital Age' directed by Florian Cramer. The incredible support I had from the whole staff is leading me to finish a whole book about the topic that will be published early next year. They also organised a three-day international conference around the topics of my research called "PRINT/PIXEL" and that was a unique and very involving experience for a researcher.

Is Magnet a European network, and do you receive any European funding?

It wasn't meant to be European but it kind of is. There were and are members from Portugal, the Czech Republic, Latvia, among others, but also one from Mexico. Regarding European funding, we tried that at first but we were not good at organising the whole funding issue. Being a network is most of all a learning process.

As a network, we learned from the first Magnet reader. It came about in a period when there was no activity,

and the network was about to die. We received an invitation by the Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA)[119] in Glasgow to participate in a conference and present a reader we were loosely assembling. At that point I thought that this was the only opportunity to get it done, and that was the end of the whole idea of democratic decision-making, of discussing everything together. In the end I'm with my friend Geert from Staalplaat label who once said: 'production is not democratic'. I think he's right!

I wanted to go ahead with the reader, so I suggested to lead on it, to coordinate and take decisions, and asked if others wanted to join in. Two members actively supported the reader, two more agreed to the process but decided not to actively support because they were too busy. It was fair and it worked – we published the book just in time for the conference, and the network had re-established itself again. Every project is treated differently, and we did something else with Mute.[120] Unfortunately, the kind of established way of working in our digital culture environment where we meet, then set up a mailing list, and when home (plan to) start developing things hardly every works. Not even if manuals have been established, because everyone returns to their daily routine.

What does the organisational structure of Neural look like, and how is its content decided upon?

I have been doing monographic issues for two or three years now. It is me who decides on the content, inspired by meeting and talking to other people. Another important factor in continuing and shaping Neural was to receive feedback. Compliments were really important as a moral support and motivation, but from the very start onwards I was also looking for critical feedback, and for critics. Critics are free advisors, and very important for a project like Neural.

I decide on new topics by observing what's happening, breathing what's going on, and checking if it is something that can be packed into a Neural issue. A few years ago, for example, there was a big China hype. I thought I should be doing something around that topic, but first I had to critically examine if I was not only driven by my own curiosity and would be able to get enough content. It took one year, but I finally published a hopefully interesting issue. One of the few reasons I think that Neural survived for such a long time is that I really took care of the quality. Many magazines that just remained of average quality were killed by the amount of information that you can find online. If you maintain a very high level of quality, that's a different story...

Is it difficult to find contributors for Neural? I remember that when I talked to Claire Welsby from InterventTech, for example, she said it was difficult for her to find contributors and writers for the platform.

Neural has about nine contributors at the moment. Firstly, it's difficult to find good writers because there are many beautiful people with very good ideas who are simply not so skilled in writing. And secondly, my business model does not allow me to pay them a lot, just a symbolic contribution. So it's also a question of being prepared for contributors to start immediately but stop after a short while, either because they get bored, or they want to use that experience to build up or continue something else. This is totally fine for me, but it means that I have to be prepared that contributors, and also collaborators for different tasks, won't last forever!

I do receive requests for writing and contributing to Neural, but it's crucial

to check if they're the right people. Also, I am rather looking for writers than for academics, because their focus is not as open as I would need it to be to cover a broad range of topics. However, they might be involved in certain topics that Neural covers – but that's a different thing from a more regular contributor.

My current contributors are international. There is Jonah Bruckner Cohen and Paolo Pedercini from the US; Mark Hancock from the UK and Vicente Guitierrez from Tokyo; Michael Dieter from Australia, plus Vito Campanelli and Leandro Pisano from Italy who contribute – if they're interested in the topics I suggest. Neural is not a very democratic forum, but it is based on understanding: as editor-in-chief I suggest the rough lines and the topics, and am very open to suggestions from their side. Having published the magazine for 16 years, I generally have enough experience of what is worth publishing and what is not, and to make a final selection. Usually I ask them to write about specific issues. Nevertheless sometimes they suggest something that I was not aware about and it turns out absolutely worth writing about!

You have just mentioned only male writers – are all your main contributors men?

No! The most faithful writer is Valentina Culatti, Italian but living in London, and there's also Katrien Jacobs, who lives in Hong Kong and writes about body, gender, technology and sexuality. But unfortunately it is mostly men. I am very sensitive to the gender question, because I believe that women do write in a different way, especially about specific topics like body, politics, and music, and it can be much more interesting! Generally speaking, I believe that a balanced team of women and men leads to more interesting and higher quality content.

A final purely hypothetical question: 1993 and 2009… if you were starting the same enterprise today, would you still be doing a printed magazine?

Probably I would not start to print something now, I would experiment with all the online facilities available and familiarise myself with production techniques online. I would probably do some experiments in print but it would be the opposite of what I did when I started in 1993. Of course printing and online are at the antipodes compared to when I started! At the same time there is so much space for experiment in both print and online and almost countless possibilities for making and producing things. I want to build on the cultural capital that I have acquired in print over such a long time, and don't want to switch anymore.

From an economic point of view it would be a wise choice to completely switch to online publishing.

But that would not be a challenge for me anymore, or a different one. I am not saying that I will be printing things forever, but as long as it is still interesting to play with print – the physical thing, to experiment with these different relationships of something completely virtual and something much more physical, I will remain doing it.[121]

Do you think that Neural had an influence on the lack of (print) journalism concerning digital arts and media culture? Do you think Neural had an impact on informing and transforming that kind of journalism?

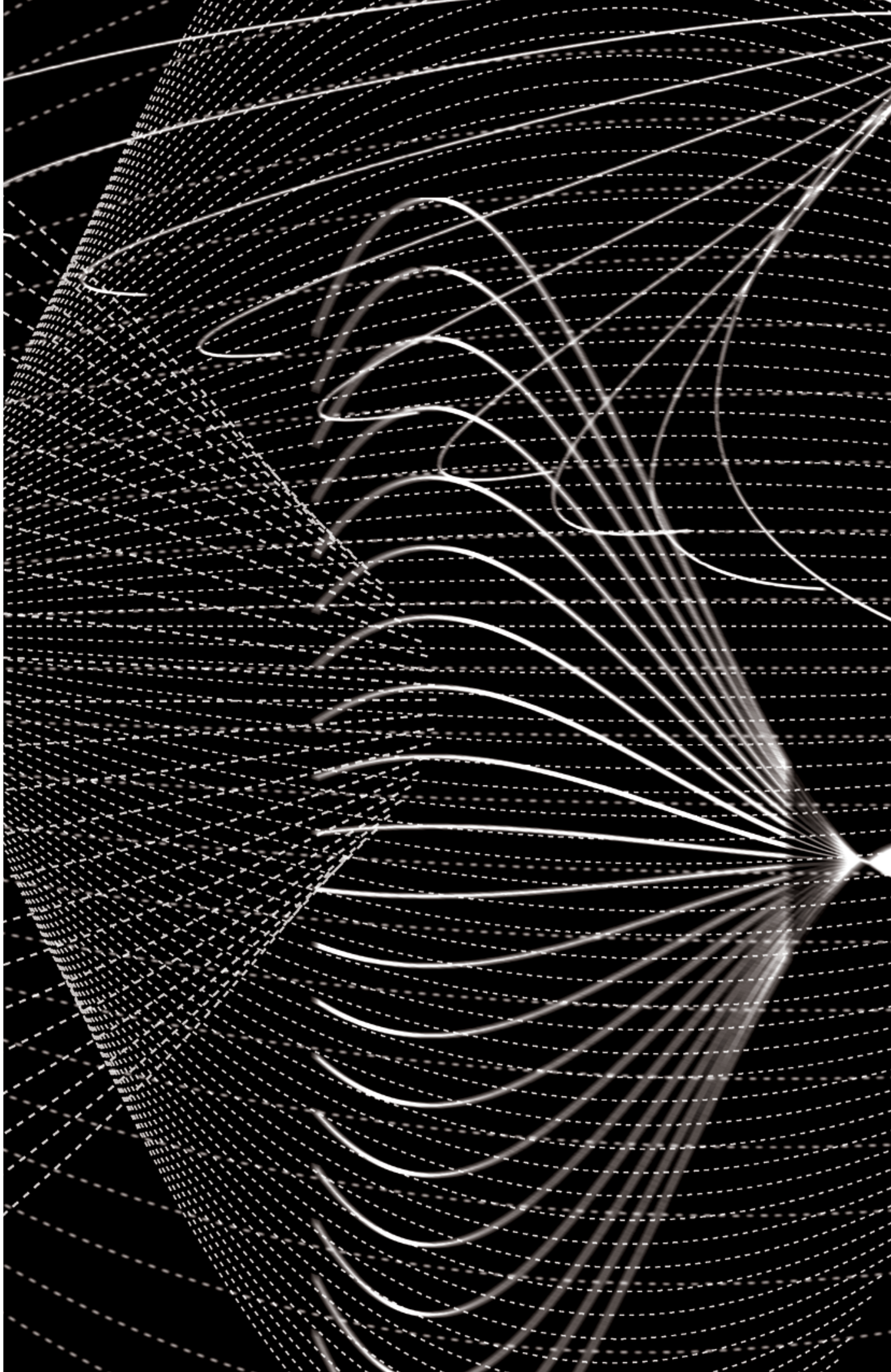
I hope that it increased the understanding – that is part of the mission if you're one of the few dealing with the conceptual side of media arts and culture. Given the long time period of Neural I do hope that I have had at least some influence, and inspired a few things that happened. These are also the indicators for success if you look at Neural as an active node within a network! If you are a node, you're sending out waves all over and it is often difficult to tell who these waves are reaching. It is true that digital arts and culture was a very closed field and did not succeed in breaking the walls to reach beyond its own scene to the broader contemporary arts and culture.

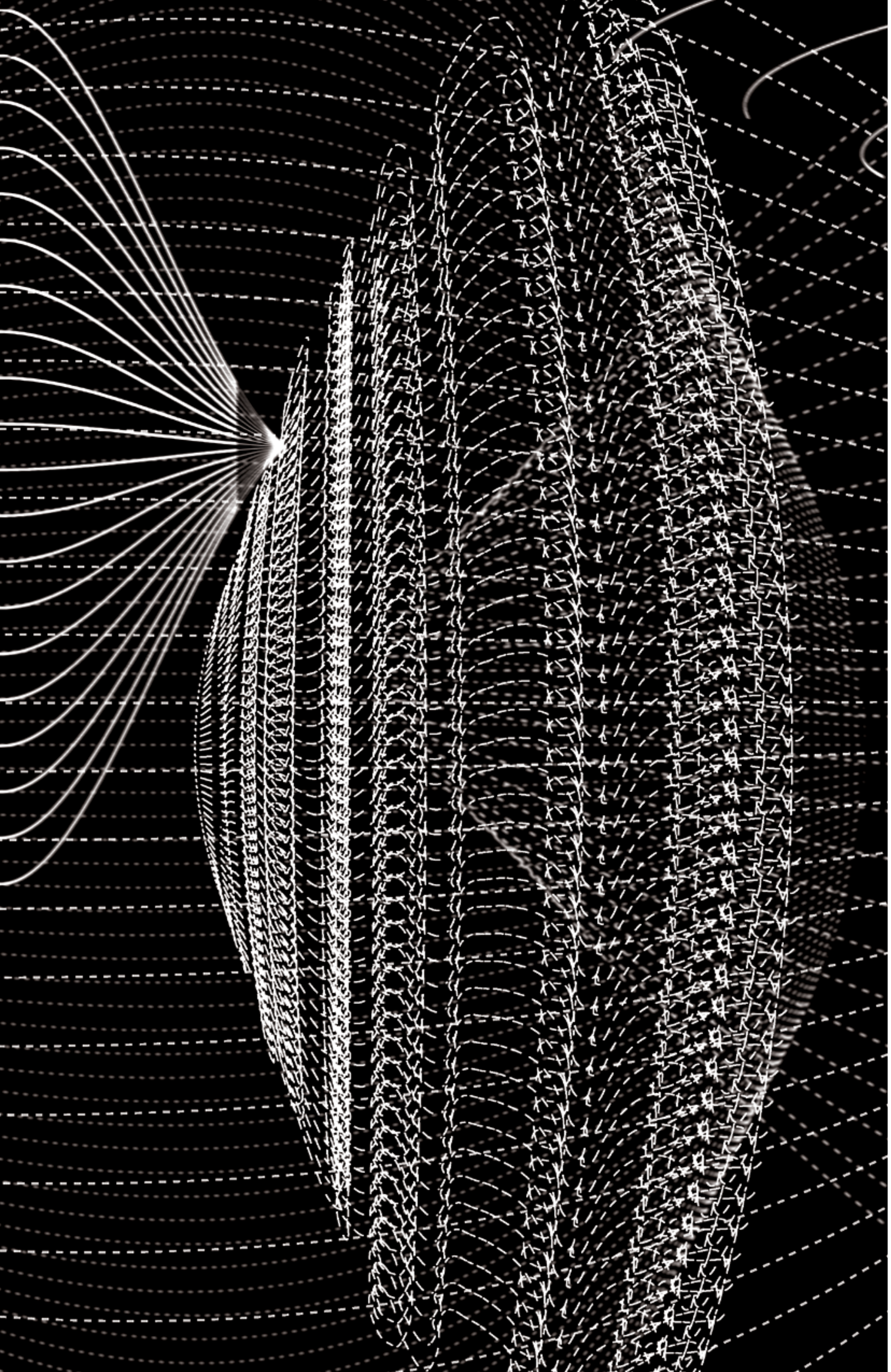
In the beginning that was due to technical issues – curators, journalists and critics just did not understand why or how something worked and what the value of digital arts was. What happens now is a process of legitimisation through practise and production of hybrid work, which has consequences beyond the digital and is not based on technical innovation only. I find that very important because it increases the accessibility of media arts and it leads to 'real' waves and consequences as we namely did in Google Will Eat Itself and Amazon Noir, and plenty of artists do today. Net art seems to be developing along these lines.

This development looks similar to what happened with video art in the beginning. However, it's a different time now, and I do think that new generations are very open to digital arts. Maybe they are less prepared, maybe less critical and less radical; but when you mix an audience of young people and people in their 40s and 50s, you get an interesting mix. The end of the 20th century has started a kind of passage and media arts should become even more interesting in the future!

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109 http://neural.it
110 http://www.neural.it/art/2007/07/magnet_reader_2_between_paper.phtml
111 http://www.nettime.org
112 http://magnet-ecp.org
113 http://www.neural.it
114 http://www.wired.com
115 http://www.neural.it/art/2002/01/various_artists_virtual_realit.phtml
116 http://www.gwei.org
117 http://amazon-noir.com
118 http://www.magnet-ecp.org
119 http://cca-glasgow.com/home
120 http://www.metamute.org
121 See also: The Persistance of Paper: http://www.neural.it/art/2007/07/the_persistance_of_paper_by_al.phtml





Régine Debatty

About Régine Debatty
As founder of the highly influential blog we-make-money-not-art.com,[122] Régine Debatty has been nicknamed 'Queen of Bloggers'. She writes passionately about the intersection between art, design and technology, as well as curating art shows and speaking at conferences and festivals about the way artists, hackers and interaction designers use – and misuse – technology. She talks to LabforCulture about how she chooses what goes into her blog, her economic model (or lack of one!) – and how her blog feels so much part of her that it's like an arm or a lung...

The following interview between and Annette Wolfsberger and Regine Debatty was held on 17 June 2009 via Skype chat.

When and why did you start blogging?

In March 2004. By chance. I was bored at work. Really bored. I worked in an office in Italy and I was paid to do absolutely nothing. All I had to do was pretend I was working. In November 2003, I met a new media artist. He was doing art performances with mobile phones. To me, at the time, mobile phones were merely a tool to work. An annoying tool I hated and nothing more. I found the work of that artist so interesting I started to scan the web to find more information about this mix of art and technology. At first, I was printing everything I could find online. My office table quickly became a huge mess with big files full of paper and stickers that attempted to put some order in the sea of information I was accumulating.

At some point, a friend (actually it's the artist I mentioned above, his name is Max and he's my wonderful boyfriend) told me I should archive everything on a blog. I was a bit reluctant at first, but after a few days I became totally passionate about it. Blogging was just something I was doing for myself, I never thought people would find the blog and read it. But they did. Another blogger told

me one day that I should put some advertising on the blog and see what happens. I also had some savings at the bank so I decided to quit my job and see how long I could survive with just the blog and a bit of advertising. It was really hard in the beginning. I was so poor but I loved blogging. Five years later, I'm still there and my situation is very different from what it was then, but I'm still enjoying it.

Have there been any specific phases that wmmna has gone through since its beginning, e.g. what was the turning point for you to be able to become a professional blogger (that is to say, to be able to live from your blogging)?

I can't really think of any turning point. One day I discovered blogging and I was sucked into it.

How would you describe your editorial policy?

It's very simple. I just do what I want. I don't respond very well to any kind of constraint or obligation. I guess this might explain in part the success of my blog. It's clear by now that people can send me their books and I'll be grateful but I won't review the book if I don't find it particularly exciting.

> **They can invite me to exhibitions but if I don't find anything meaningful in the show, I won't discuss it on the blog.**

It's all very subjective, un-planned and un-tamed. I don't pretend to write extensively nor exclusively about any topic. At times I will write a lot about architecture, at others I'll cover mostly activist projects or video art from China. It depends on where I happen to be at the time, or the mood I'm in. I plan to dedicate one week of my blogging activities next month (or the one after) to the terrible conditions Palestinians are currently facing, just because it's an issue I care about.

I could also add that some names pop up more often than others. I blatantly favour organizations or art centers such as MediaLab Prado in Madrid,[123] CCCS[124] in Firenze (Florence) or LABoral[125] in Gijon. My blog also follows with some regularity the work of curator Domenico Quaranta[126] or of biotech artist Adam Zaretsky.[127] It's not because they are nicer to me than others (but I must admit that they are awfully nice) nor because they ask me anything. I just happen to admire the passion and talent they bring to their work, no matter the difficulties they might encounter. It's incredibly inspiring and gratifying to work in the same sphere as such people.

'Queen of Bloggers': You are one of the few and only European bloggers who can live off their blogging without being part of an institution, which is still quite rare in Europe – especially for culture bloggers. In how far has the blogging scene changed since you started, and do you see it professionalising or monetising further?

I sometimes wonder why people call me 'Queen of Bloggers'. It's both very flattering but also embarrassing. Maybe it's because of my name? I'm quite sure bloggers would not love to be ruled by me.

More seriously, I think that blogging could be further professionalised. It might take more time than I hope, though. Almost every day I'm reminded that bloggers – even if some of them do a job at least as reliable and thorough as some newspapers and even if they have a wider audience – do not necessarily benefit from the same recognition and privileges as journalists.

Alessandro from Neural in an interview described his blog as 'a magic portal for opportunities'.[128] In your professional and business model, what is the relationship between your on- and offline activities?

They are intimately linked. People tend to contact me because they've heard of my blog and certainly not because I'm the most competent or smartest. There are so many people brighter than me out there but they don't benefit from the opportunity-magnet that a fairly popular blog is.

How would you describe your economic model?

Well, this is the third question that hints at the way I make money and I must say that talking money has always made me uncomfortable. Now I do realise that the very title of my blog might have you assume the opposite. Anyway.... there's this thing about bloggers: one never finds it odd to ask them how much they earn, but one would not ask the same question of a journalist, an opera singer or independent curator, for example. It would be seen as indelicate. I wonder if it's a sign that blogging is not yet regarded as a serious activity.

I don't have an economic model and if I did, it certainly is one I would not recommend to anyone: I've never looked for advertisers. I even have advertising spaces that I give for free to cultural organisations just because I like them or find their activities worth a little help, I'm always super late at sending invoices, etc. I do a series of things with the sole aim of making money (I write for magazines, for example) but blogging has never been one of them. Earning money with the blog is a wonderful privilege, but it is not my motor.

When asking cultural operators in Europe for cultural blog recommendations, Adam Somlai-Fischer (The Kitchen, Budapest[129]) rated your blog far higher in influence, immediacy and accuracy than the print magazine Wired.[130] Also the pixel/print conference recently discussed these relationships.[131] How would you describe the relationship between traditional print-media like these and online journalism?

That is a tough and complex question, but because you've mentioned two people I like a lot, Alessandro and Adam, I'll try and elaborate a bit.

I see paper and pixel as two very compatible media. They might seem different, they certainly have different rhythms and different rules but I can't write off either of them from my life. I could say that I spend way more time with online magazines than with paper ones. But that statement applies to certain areas of my life better than to others. For example, one of my passions is beauty products. I've completely stopped buying women's magazines because I find the information about cosmetics on blogs and forums far more reliable. I know some bloggers are happily copying and pasting PR blurbs but I don't read this kind of blog. I follow the ones that talk with sincerity about the products they review. Man, I'd love to swap places with them. They'd be sent books about media art and I'd receive tons of beauty creams and mascaras. They'd go to ars electronica and I'd be having anti-cellulite massages in a spa. On the other hand, I always pack architecture and art magazines (in particular the wonderful Volume) with me when I take the plane. I like the image spreads, taking notes in

the margins, and I also enjoy the fact that most of what they write about (and the very way they write) doesn't often have an equivalent online. More generally speaking, I can't live without the online edition of The Guardian.[132] They do an excellent job at making screen-reading utterly enjoyable. It's not just a question of applying a fancy design or adding sexy photo galleries like other newspaper do. The Italian newspaper La Repubblica,[133] which I otherwise like a lot, has an embarrassing idea of what the online edition of a magazine can be: articles are not very often updated, information is generally scanty and there are some vulgar galleries of women in bikinis that multiply page views but not really the credibility of the online edition. The Guardian, on the other hand, has poured an incredible amount of intelligence and energy on its website. Some of its journalists are writing opinionated and reliable blogs, the web architecture is clear and efficient, they make smart use of videos and readers' contributions.

But the area I follow most closely is obviously art journalism, critique and blogging. I see loads of connections and mingling here. Journalists starting a blog, sometimes at the invitation of the newspaper or magazine they work with. And bloggers are asked to contribute to posh art magazines.

One of the most priceless lessons that blogs have taught me is that being personal and laid-back doesn't have to be a heresy.

Actually, when some editor asks me to write a column for a magazine, a chapter for a book, or a text for a catalogue, that's always what they request: the intimate, spontaneous and personal voice they hear on my blog. What they ask for is the point of view of the blogger, who also happens to be an expert in the field. At least that's what they seem to believe.

I understood from the Elastico-clan that you have guest-blogged for them in the past, and I remember guest bloggers on wmmna too, at least a while ago: how important is collaborative (writing) practice for you?

Not important. I love Elastico, Jose-Luis, Marta and Antonio, so it was an honour to write a couple of posts for them.

Now about the collaborators for my blog. Konomi is back in Japan and doesn't have as much free time as he used to when he was in the USA. I miss him. Sascha Pohflepp[134] used to write on the blog but he's finishing his studies at the Royal College of Art and he doesn't even seem to find time to eat, poor thing. Sascha is the worst thing that can happen to a blogger who looks for contributors. The worst! He's so smart, has such impeccable taste and great personality that I don't think anyone could ever replace him. I'm usually annoying to work with because I know what I want for the blog, or so I seem to think. Sascha sometimes came up with ideas for posts that I didn't find exciting but I knew it would be silly to say 'no' to his ideas. He might have different tastes from me sometimes but he still has great taste and a way to write that makes the dullest topic sound fascinating.

So I wish more people could contribute to the blog, especially because I tend to write excruciatingly slowly, but as long as no scientist

has found a way to clone Sascha, I'll just keep on blogging as a lonesome cowboy.

How much do you know about your readers? Do you engage in an active dialogue with your readership (via comments, Twitter, Facebook or other tools)?

Well, I wish they'd engage in a more active dialogue but I also know that I'm not really encouraging them to.

I don't Twitter and my Facebook page is private. I mostly post videos of Demis Roussos on my fb wall. I wish my blog had a Facebook page but I got totally disheartened when I realized someone had been faster than me. There's some awful wmmna page on fb, and the person responsible for it would not answer my messages. Reminds me that I should do something about it instead of sitting there complaining to you.

I nevertheless feel that I have a very close relationship with my readers because I meet many of them at festivals, conferences and other events. People would then come up to me to introduce themselves. That's how I know them. I love them. It sounds a cliché but I do. Also many students write me to ask for some help in researching a project and I'm always happy to give a hand. (Note to any journalist reading these lines: I won't help you, ok?) Seriously you can't imagine the number of journalists who contact bloggers and ask them to do some research for them. I had very bad experiences in the past: journalists copy/pasting what I had written to them and never giving credit, not even sending me an email to thank me. I'm not looking for exposure, but a 'thank you' because I've spent a couple of hours doing your job would be nice. Not all journalists are like that, thank god, but I'm not taking any more risks.

In how far are you influenced by your readership's responses?

Very little. Every reader has a different idea of what my blog should be, everyone expects something different and it would be impossible for me to make everyone happy. What I could do, however, is look at my stats and see which stories are the most read and commented on and act accordingly. That's precisely what I did a few years ago and I was extremely disappointed to see that the posts that meant the most to me were far from being the most successful. Instead, I noticed that the most popular stories were about robots, sex and all of that together when possible.

Two or three years ago, I started writing about biotech art and the response from some readers was spectacularly negative. Because my blog had been associated with digital art and interaction design so far, artists, designers and other readers would come up to me at festivals and tell me: "*Would you please stop writing about biotech art? It's gross and it has nothing to do with the blog*." That's the moment I realised that the blog, that space I had always regarded as a private space, a place where I would share with my readers (or not) what interested me, had become something public in the eyes of many readers. I fight against that. It would make me miserable to write to please as many people as possible. It would probably drive me mad too.

From the past to the future: Has wmmna reached its perfect state for you already, or how do you see it develop further?

I'm never happy with whatever I do, so I would never believe that my blog has reached a perfect state. Far from it.

No clue about the future. I wish I had smart strategies and cunning plans to share with the world but nope, just living by the day.

And thinking beyond that, have you ever considered what will happen to your blog if you ever decide to reduce or retire from blogging – will it become a repository, would you hand it over?
The blog is so much part of myself, it would be like handing over an arm or a lung.

And finally, are there any other (cultural) blogs or online media that you would recommend?

The blog I'd take on a desert island is Edgar Gonzalez. It's in Spanish but I've never really seen its equivalent anywhere. It's mostly an architecture blog but it also touches upon art, interactive design, and other forms of culture. It's witty and written by someone who has a great personality and it shows.[135] It's closely followed by Subtopia, a field guide to military urbanism.[136] It's in French and about literature but it's written by my best friend, who appreciates Demis Roussos almost as much as I do.
So here, Maddy, I often wish you were near me.[137]

There is La Petite Claudine. Once again, a blog in Spanish. That girl, Marta from Elastico, has impeccable taste, one of the wittiest minds I've ever met and writes with talent about technology, art, sex or whatever takes her fancy.[138] Curating.info is my favourite culture blog in English. The title says it all; it's a fantastic resource written by someone who knows what she's talking about.[139] Neural, of course, the feed of the website is great because you get Alessandro Ludovico's Delicious links.[140]

Verve Photo. The New Breed of Documentary Photographers. Just go there and you'll be an instant convert.[141]
I love rebel:art. It's in German but it's one of the best resources I have found that relays the art+activist scene.[142]

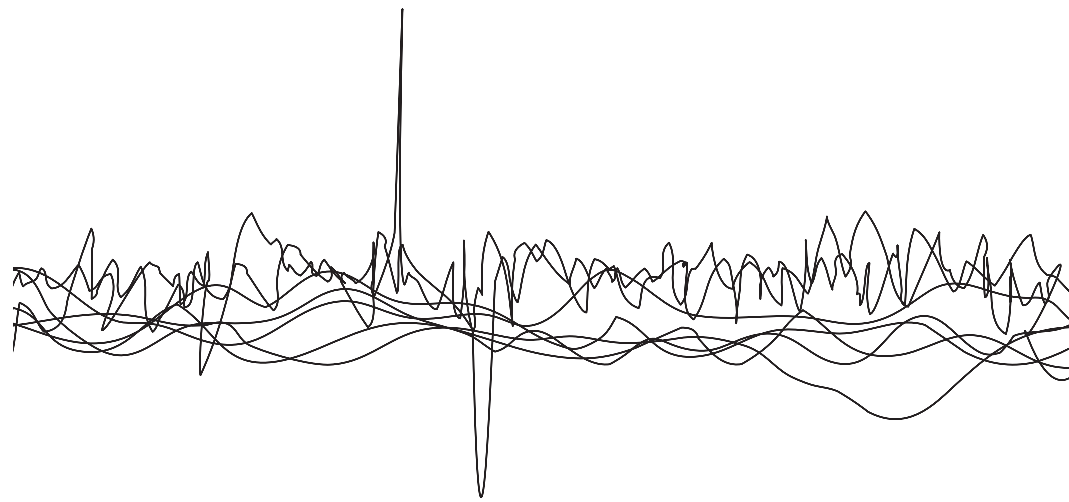
The Groundswell Blog does similarly fantastic work but is based in the US. It also has a more design-y perspective.[143]

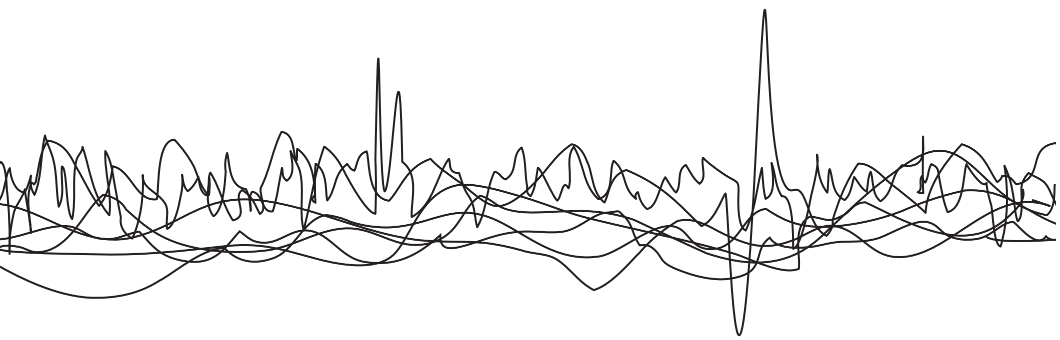
There's the Resist project I'm involved in. It's a multi-disciplinary project about new ways to tackle economic apartheid. I'm currently running the art section of the blog. In a pretty laid-back way so far, but in the second phase we'll be commissioning artists' works that offer everyday people new ways to resist and engage with a number of social issues.[144]

...and last but not least there's WNMNA.[145] These guys are wonderful. Sometimes they would translate my posts and sometimes they write their own (which cover more closely the Chinese new media art scene). Unlike me they have unlimited resources of energy (my laziness is legendary) and organise their own events, workshops and artists' talks to spread the new media art love in China.

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122 http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com
123 http://medialab-prado.es
124 http://www.strozzina.org
125 http://www.laboralcentrodearte.org
126 http://www.domenicoquaranta.net
127 http://www.emutagen.com
128 http://magnet-ecp.org/node/63
129 http://www.kitchenbudapest.hu
130 http://www.wired.com
131 http://blog.wdka.nl/communication-in-a-digital-age
132 http://www.guardian.co.uk
133 http://www.repubblica.it
134 http://www.pohflepp.com
135 http://www.edgargonzalez.com
136 http://subtopia.blogspot.com
137 http://deslivresetdesanges.blogspot.com
138 http://www.lapetiteclaudine.com
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141 http://vervephoto.wordpress.com
142 http://www.rebelart.net/diary
143 http://blog.groundswellcollective.com
144 http://www.resistnetwork.com
145 http://we-need-money-not-art.com





BLOGS AS CULTURAL SEISMOGRAPHS

by Annette Wolfsberger
With comments by
Nicola Mullenger

A viral journey

LabforCulture initiated the research into cultural blogging in Europe partly based on its mission to encourage the cultural sector to use technology and digital tools – and to provide up-to-the-minute information on cultural collaboration. Exploring cultural blogging and the people behind this creative output had never been done before. It was an opportunity not to be missed.

The research took the shape of a viral journey. It was obvious that it would be impossible to carry out a comprehensive quantitative research survey of all the cultural orientated blogs across Europe. This was not only due to the sheer size of the field, but also because of the language and contextual barriers and searchability and findability of cultural blogs. Instead an initial survey among more than 50 key cultural operators, mainly with a background in popular or contemporary culture, as well as media arts, led to many suggestions of cultural bloggers. From an initial shortlist, nine in-depth interviews were conducted throughout 2009 with some of the leading cultural bloggers that had been identified.

'Cultural blogging' is not an established term. The blogs featured in this publication are non-institutional and trans-disciplinary. They were chosen according to their format and focus, as well as according to their geographical spread (although many of the blogs featured are international in their focus, and therefore the nationality of bloggers is not that relevant). Most of the cultural blogs featured relate to art in its broadest possible form, involving new media and avoiding categorisation, pushing boundaries, often towards other sectors. This mixture of culturally orientated bloggers highlights trends and tendencies, and all of them contribute to a wider understanding of the cultural blogging universe.

Why examine cultural blogging?

Cultural blogs substantially add to a critical layer within the blogosphere and become increasingly significant sources of reference. Many of the featured ones have existed for several years, and bloggers acknowledge that the blogging environment has undergone significant changes in the recent past. Initially, blogs represented a personal, individual voice on a specific topic. However, this has now shifted towards a wide variety of content and styles, including individual blogs, collaborative blogs, moderated

or open platforms. The increased availability of technological means is not enough on its own to explain the increased variety and availability of blogs. Undoubtedly, the low costs, accessibility and user-friendliness of (free) software such as Wordpress and Blogger have had an impact, but it is also the social and cultural demands that have driven these technological developments.[146] During the past decade, the field has matured: sustained experimentation, enthusiasm and shared determination have led to a richer cultural blogging environment than ever.

Marco Mancuso of Digicult says in his interview, *'I consider blogging or web journalism and critique the present and the future of critical and independent information: it is today, and will be in the future, one of the most important voices in the cultural sector.'* However, the scenario Mancuso sketched seems to be one that yet has to reach the broader cultural sector: within the more traditional arts fields, bloggers and web journalists alike still need to gain a lot of ground.[147]

A need for new journalism

A common feature that unites many of the bloggers interviewed is that they all started blogging because they felt there was insufficient access to and a lack of space within the existing media for new voices, especially when covering cross-sectoral or trans-disciplinary cultural issues. According to Alek Tarkowski from Kultura 2.0, blogs made it possible to introduce new and emerging voices and issues into the public debate. Traditional newspapers could not deal with the phenomena of media arts and culture and parked them in editorial sections that did not fit. Spanish collaborative bloggers Elastico state that before their blog, *'There was nothing like it, both in topics and in tone! We always made it very accessible. We wanted to reach everybody – not only people in specific fields.'* They identified a need for new journalism, for new and interesting topics beyond the scope of newspapers and they acted on this need.

Blogs finally made it possible to sketch current and emerging arts developments from a personal and subjective perspective, bypassing traditional segmentation and academic discourse. As Michelle Kasprzak from Curating.info puts it, *'blogging [is] an interface to the public without an intermediary'*, and Claire Welsby from InterventTech.net explains that *'the UK was lacking an accessible and lateral platform for art-tech. A place that embraced the range of artists exploring these territories in terms of form, creative process and subject.'* Blogs and bloggers were quicker and better suited than traditional media to understanding new means of (arts) production and to contextualising that transformation.

In his interview, Alessandro Ludovico from neural.it says, *'In the beginning, printing was king and online was accessory. Now it's exactly the opposite...'* The relationship between printed media and online journalism – or between 'print and pixel'[148] is an important issue for bloggers. Rather than being competitive, the relationship can be described as complementary. Régine Debatty from we-make-money-not-art.com feels that print is complementary to blogging as they both inhabit very different rhythms and rules. Although Ludovico states in his interview that, from an economic perspective, it would be wise for him to give up his printed magazine and completely switch to online publishing, he still longs to *'play with print'*.

However, it is important to note that the role of news(paper)blogs within the printed press has strongly increased within the past five years. Excellent blogs like the Dutch nrc.next blog[149] or the British newspaper, The Guardian,[150] or experiments such as Polish Polytika's inclusion of the Kultura 2.0 blog, are just some examples of this.

Blogs as public notebooks[151]

The interviewed bloggers confirm their intention to use their blog to increase access to (previously niche or hidden) knowledge for diverse audiences that were not catered for until then. In some cases, this might stem from a cultural activist approach (e.g. Mancuso's Digicult). Elastico underline the notion of their blog as a *'public notebook'* – a conversation tool exploring the idea of transparent research between four writers that the audience was invited to join. Kasprzak describes her blog as an open repository and archive of her curatorial thoughts, and Welsby confirms that InterventTech.net is supposed to be *'a collective voice for an otherwise fragmented scene'*.

Many bloggers confirm that building an active community is difficult to achieve, as the majority of the audience consists of 'random readers', as Tarkowski describes them. And although blog commenting is scarce, bloggers do entertain intense on- and offline relationships with their community.

These audience-blogger relationships are multi-layered and cannot be fully understood when looking merely into commenting, as they manifest themselves in many different ways.[152] The Neural blog, for example, does not even have a comment function. However, in spite of this, Ludovico confirms that he has a strong and direct relationship with the Neural audience, e.g. via mail or in person. Mancuso says he gets feedback from the Digicult community on a daily basis. Robert Misik of misik.at regards the input and feedback that he gets via Facebook as far more interesting than the comments he receives via his blog. When asked about the relationship with her audience, Debatty recalls that parts of her community protested when she changed her editorial focus a few years ago. *'That's the moment I realised that the blog, that space I had always regarded as a private space, a place where I would share with my readers (or not) what interested me, had become something public in the eyes of many readers.'*

The tools applied for distributed conversations extend beyond commenting, and they are temporary and shifting. *'Twitter is not the end of blogging,'* as Anne Helmond notes, but the platforms within which online writing and conversations take place are continually shifting. Web authors and journalists have embedded microblogging, or 'media on the run formats' such as Twitter or Facebook, within their blogs; or else they have entirely shifted their writing activity to other platforms, as some members of the Elastico blog have done. Conversations and commenting have shifted from comment functions on blogs to social networking environments such as Twitter and Facebook. And although several bloggers were initially sceptical about adding social networking tools to their blogs, now there is hardly anyone who has not integrated them. As Ludovico states in his interview, despite his initial scepticism, *'you have to know and use them to understand them'*.

Blogging as a lonesome cowboy?[153]

The forms of cultural blogging differ widely. This summary will not expand on categorisations too deeply, but Jill Walker Rettberg's book Blogging[154] offers further reading: she beautifully sketches the development of publishing from early print to the latest blogs, and outlines different types of blogs.

The romantic idea of a blogger as

a lonesome cowboy, however, does not suffice anymore. While a few of the blogs excel because of their singular voice and personal tone (for example, Kasprzak's Curating.info, Debatty's we-make-money-not-art.com, or Misik's videoblogs), others can be better described as collaborative blogs (for example, Elastico, which is run by four Spanish journalist friends and Kultura 2.0). Some blogs are informative and discursive platforms, such as InterventTech.net or Digicult (although Mancuso describes his magazine and blog *'as cultural and journalistic tools'* rather than as open platforms). Neural could be defined as a platform, or potentially more accurately as an interconnected node in a network that manifests itself as both a magazine and blog (with different but similar content).

All of the blogs, however, even the platform-based ones, have personalities within or behind them that make them distinctive. This is not only true for singular bloggers such as Debatty, who confirms that her blog is valued for its *'intimate, spontaneous and personal voice'*. Her blog is so much part of herself, she says, that handing it over to someone else would feel like handing over her lung or her arm. Misik claims that bloggers without their very own voice will *'drown in the blogosphere'*. Ludovico is the face of Neural, and although Digicult has many facets, it is Mancuso's voice itself that stands out. This is also the case for the Elastico 'family', as they describe themselves.

It's still Wild West[155]

In her introduction, Mercedes Bunz positions cultural blogs at the border of digital capitalism. The blogging field in general, and the cultural blogging field in particular, are still evolving at such a rapid speed that it is difficult to draw more than temporary conclusions on economic developments and models. The economic models behind blogs are highlighted because of the presumption that they will also change within a transforming landscape of cultural production, distribution, consumption and participation of new media.[156] With the blogging sector maturing, and blogging transforming from a hobby (in the most positive meaning of the word) to a job, one would expect that (cultural) bloggers could make a living from their online writing. This hardly is the case.

Bloggers are unhappy with the fact that blogging is still not fully recognised within the media and the cultural field. Blogging is not a *'lower form of journalism'*, as Mancuso contests. It is more than a *'prestigious CV building job'*, according to Helmond, who is disheartened by the fact that organisers still expect her to live-blog from conferences with just a free ticket as reimbursement. Also Debatty is astonished that bloggers still do not necessarily benefit from the same recognition and privileges as journalists, even if they have a bigger audience than some newspapers and are just as professional.

No one contests the need for further professionalisation. Blogging is still not included in many curricula of journalism education, although the academic world seems to be changing. Initiatives like the Masters of Media, a collaborative blog of new media master students at the University of Amsterdam, serves as a good example.[157] Recently, however, there does seem to be a gradual shift in the recognition of blogging content. For example [158], the annual George Orwell Prize, which rewards outstanding political writing in the UK, has given awards to blogs for the past two years.

The financial expectations of bloggers differ widely. Several bloggers do not strive to monetise

their blog. They would be even less inclined to do so if it could affect their blogging style or frequency, or their independence. They blog out of a deep interest in their subject area. For most, being able to live off their blog is wishful thinking. The initial investment and maintenance costs are low – Mancuso says he runs the Digicult blog on 50 Euros a year – but the countless hours of mainly unpaid labour put into the blog transform them into the invaluable resources that they are.

As far as sources of income are concerned, public funding for (non-institutional) blogs remains still largely unexplored by bloggers, and funding seems to be close to non-existent in any case. Some bloggers have experimented with Google or Facebook adverts; their experiences differ, and success rates still seem difficult to measure. Selling online advertisement space (e.g. banners) on their own blogs is another source of income. According to Kasprzak, the *'what do I get out of it - factor'* is one explanation as to why there are still so few blogs on contemporary visual arts: it just does not pay off – at least not straight away. Bloggers have crafted their own models that would be difficult to replicate, such as Kultura 2.0 – a blog independent in content but linked to a newspaper.

The most common model of generating income is via related activities, such as researching, curating and writing for print media. Ludovico describes Neural as a *'magic portal to access other inspiring opportunities'*. This magic portal function is something that works for most of the blogs; bloggers do not earn money from their blog but because of their blog. Bloggers are interconnected nodes in a multi-layered online and offline network, and weave many different activities into an often fragile, sustainable economical model. This is also confirmed by Debatty, who is most often cited as the cultural blogger who can make a living from her blogging activities.

However, the situation is changing: in a recent interview, Florian Cramer states that, *'Blogs provide a good alternative for editorial commentary and opinions; the blogger has become the online version of the newspaper columnist.'*[159] In his view, the biggest newspaper crisis in history will lead to a shift of advertisement markets towards the internet and to real shifts towards online civic journalism.

Finally

Cultural Bloggers Interviewed offers a window into cultural blogging at an interesting point in our ever-emerging digital society; and the online LabforCulture Bloggers Map is a first attempt to visualize the multitude and variety of cultural blogs across Europe, submitted by LabforCulture's online community.

This series of interviews is a serious exploration into the scene, mapping existing models and trends, and developing an insight into why people people start and continue to maintain cultural blogs. It sketches their expectations, the relationship with their communities, and the different paths their blogging carreers take, how their blogs lead them into a wider arena of peer recognition and support their professional development.

These blogs are cultural seismographs. They are close to the ground, and their antennae feel and predict emerging and future cultural developments. They illustrate future possibilities for knowledge sharing and influencing discourse.

Finding 'your' blog(s) might involve some exploration and take time and effort, but as Mercedes Bunz outlines in her introduction, you might be rewarded by finding the one that suits and accompanies you.

As for the future, it is up to us. As an active cultural community, we are the ones to decide how to interact with these online resources, and to engage with the increasingly diverse voices. This will ultimately impact on the development of the cultural blogging scene and the cultural sector as a whole.

Thank you

to everyone across Europe who has contributed with ideas and suggestions! Without you, this endeavor would not have been possible.

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146 See also Walker Rettberg, Jill. 2008. Blogging. Polity Press: *'The idea that technology determines social and cultural trends and patterns is known as technological determinism, and has often been criticized. Although it is clear that technology does affect the ways in which we live, technology does not appear out of a void, and is itself shaped by cultural developments.'*

147 This was also reflected in the initial viral journey. Of the more than 50 European cultural operators contacted, a considerable majority of those working in popular culture did not read blogs. However, many made reference to useful leads.

148 Print & Pixel conference, Piet Zwart Institute Rotterdam, May 2010. http://wdka.hro.nl/news.asp

149 http://www.nrcnext.nl

150 http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/blog

151 Alek Tarkowski, http://kultura20.blog.polityka.pl/in his interview.

152 See Lovink's discussion of Distributed Aesthetics in Lovink, Geert. 2008. Zero Comments. Blogging and Critical Internet Culture. Routledge.

153 Régine Debatty, www.we-make-money-not-art.com in her interview.

154 Walker Rettberg, Jill. 2008. Blogging. Polity Press.

155 Michelle Kasprzak, www.curating.info in her interview.

156 Alek Tarkowski & others in their interviews.

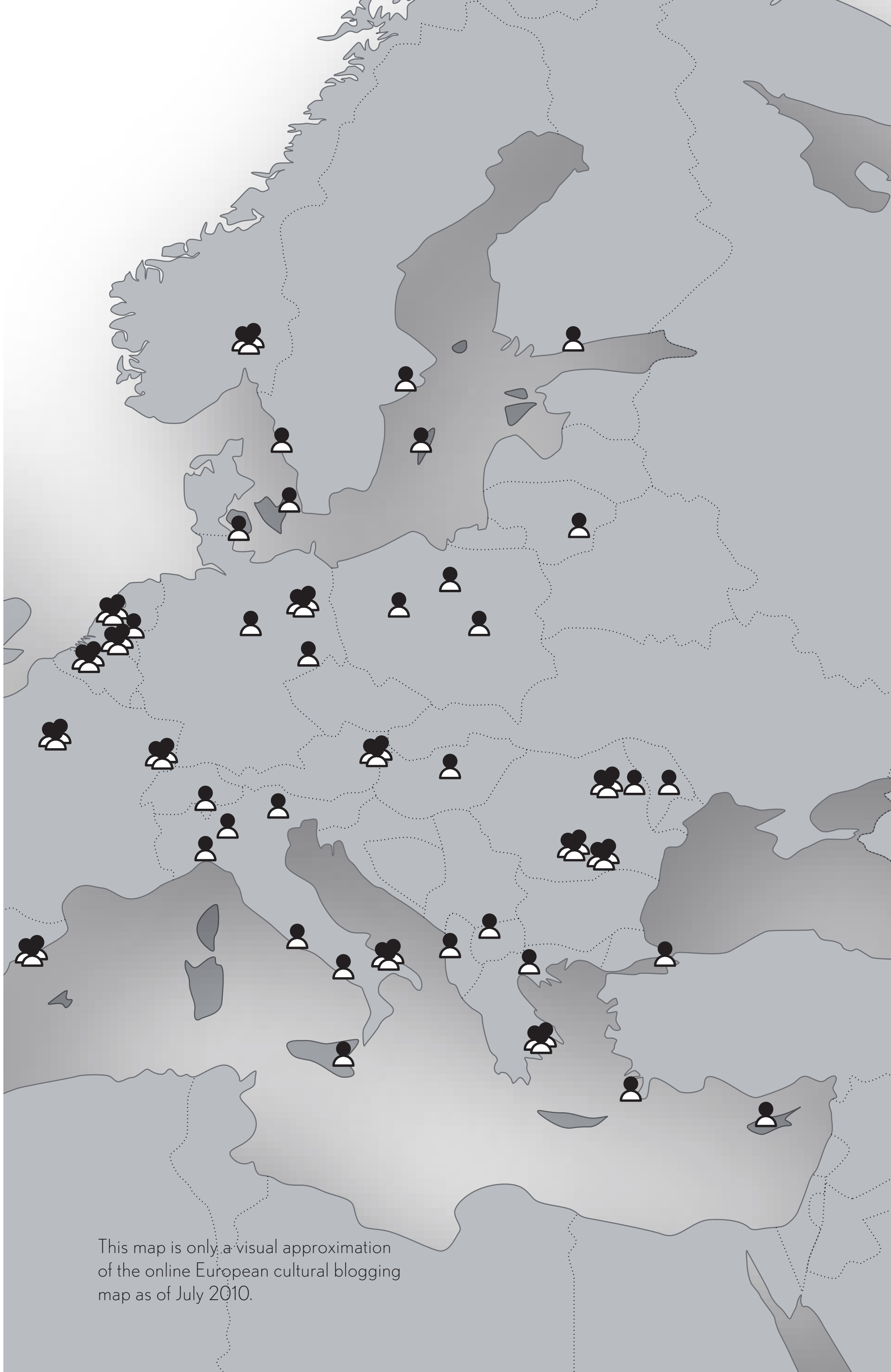
157 http://mastersofmedia.hum.uva.nl. The blog launched in September 2006, as part of the new media practices course taught at the University of Amsterdam by Geert Lovink, the founder and coordinator of this project. Now in its third year, the blog is populated by about 50 young new media researchers, either nearing completion of their master's degree or recently graduated.

158 http://www.theorwellprize.co.uk

159 Interview with Florian Cramer in Archive 2020 (Virtueel Platform, 2010).

160 http://www.labforculture.org/en/resources-for-research/contents/research-in-focus/cultural-blogging-in-europe/european-cultural-blogging-map

161 www.aaaan.net



This map is only a visual approximation
of the online European cultural blogging
map as of July 2010.

LabforCulture.org

